



僕にだけ見えてる世界

-There are no facts,
only interpretations.-

御影瑛路

イラスト／安倍吉俊

僕に世界は開かない

-There are no facts,
only interpretations.-

御影瑛路

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 電撃文庫

We Don't Open Anywhere

-There are no facts, only interpretations.



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僕らはどこにも開かない
-There are no facts, only interpretations.-

デザイン○鈴木 亨

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Miki Kouzuki

"I'll protect you with my magic."

"Oh right, I guess it would be pretty confusing to be told out of the blue that you're being protected, huh!"

"But you know, I couldn't just leave you on your own like that."

"You basically don't have any, after all."

"Magic resistance, that is."



護る。

本当に魔法が、僕を護るものであるとする。

それが僕の人生を豊かにしてくれるものだとする。

だけど、僕のために一生懸命になっている

美紀さんには言えないのだけど――

僕は割と、どうでもいい。

僕のことなどどうでもいーい。

柊耕太

「ひいらぎ ことた」

Kouta Hiiragi

Protect.

Let's suppose for a moment that magic really was something capable of protecting me.

Let's suppose it's something that could enrich my life.

Even if that's the case, there's something I can't tell Miki.

I couldn't really care less.

I couldn't care less what happens to me.



谷原雅人

「やっやあーん」

「がちゃがちゃ、がちゃがちゃ。」

「これ見よがしに鎖の音が響き渡る。」

「決してお前は解放されない」

うるさい。

「死ぬまで縛り付けられる」

うるさいー

「でも分かっているだろう」

「この鎖を引きちぎれないのは、」

「お前に引きちぎる気がないからだ」

うるさいって言っているだろう！

「がちゃがちゃ、がちゃがちゃ。」

「ああ……人を殺したい」

Masato Yahara

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

As if flaunting themselves, the chains' noise echoed.

You will never be released.

Shut up.

You will be bound until the day you die.

Shut up!

But you already knew that, right?

The reason these chains will never be torn off is because you yourself have no desire to tear them off.

I SAID SHUT UP!

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

“Ahh... I wanna kill someone.”

Kouta Hiiragi's Closed World (I)

“I’ll protect you with my magic.”

As the 18th of May was becoming part of my normal high school routine, those words changed my world.

The shoe rack was so old it clearly needed replacing and was held together in several places with shoddily-placed packing tape. I had gotten used to its musty odor over the past month, and as I took in the moldy smell, the hand picking up my loafers stopped in midair.

“Ex...cuse me?”

Although we had never spoken before, I could tell from the graceful-looking girl’s sailor uniform and red ribbon that she was a fellow first-year. While her chestnut hair was done up with a red hair band on the back of her head, it felt too short to truly call a ponytail. Her features were reminiscent of a movie star, with a petite face, wide eyes, and skin so white it seemed practically transparent. In contrast with my rather unassuming stature, she was graced with such appeal that any who glimpsed her around school would have practically no choice but to turn their head. She was without a doubt the most gorgeous person I had met in my life.

“Oh right, I guess it would be pretty confusing to be told out of the blue that you’re being protected, huh!”

With a smirk, the girl I had just met began slapping my shoulder in an overly-familiar manner. Even given our lack of closeness, between her looks and her behavior I suspected that the majority of people would feel comfortable around her.

“But you know, I couldn’t just leave you on your own like that. You basically don’t have any, after all.”

Her face grew serious as she said the following.

“Magic resistance, that is.”

That’s not a phrase you hear every day.

My fifteen years of life up until this point had left me woefully unprepared to respond to such a ridiculous proclamation, so I had no choice but to stare dumbfounded at the one who voiced it.

To make matters worse, I’m shy. While my friend Masato would disagree with that assessment, the fact that I had no idea how to interact with people when meeting them for the first time was indisputable. In any case, my head was still spinning as I futilely tried to think of an appropriate response.

To that, the girl mumbled something to the effect of “yup, he didn’t even realize how low his magic resistance is,” reaffirming her assessment of the situation.

In the face of such strange conduct, I finally remembered the name of the character standing in front of me.

“Are you by any chance Miki Kouzuki?”

“The one and only!”

That I knew her name was unlikely to come as a surprise to Kouzuki. It was only natural. She *was* famous, after all.

She was simply that attractive. Like many beauties before her, as soon as she enrolled she caught the attention of male students throughout the school. However, before long the ranks of suitors quietly receded.

The cause was the circulation of a particular rumor.

The rumor that the girl was delusional — a self-proclaimed magus.

“So what’s this ‘magic resistance’?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. It’s your resistance against magic. How immune to magic you are. I wonder how you got that way, though. Maybe there’s something strange with your astral body?”

Oh look, she started saying something undecipherable.

“...And what on earth is magic?”

“Huh? Hiiragi, you haven’t heard of magic? Haven’t you ever played a video game?”

Somehow or other it seemed she knew my name as well.

“No, what I’m asking is—”

What is the real-world concept that you’re referring to as “magic”?

...Or, that was what I was going to ask, but I stopped myself mid-sentence. If the rumors that she believed herself to be a magus were true, asking that question would cause the conversation to quickly grow awkward. After all, that phrasing would be virtually the same as rejecting the concept of magic outright. After thinking for a moment, I decided to ask a different question.

“Who exactly can use magic? Are you able to?”

“Oh, anyone can use magic. Whether or not they realize it, everyone uses magic all the time. Obviously, I’m no exception.”

“I don’t recall ever using magic, though...”

“Like I said, you just don’t realize it. In our world, even really strong magicians sometimes don’t realize their own abilities.”

“Is that... so...”

It seems she was... the real deal. It felt like it would take some time before I could figure out how to interact with her.

“Yup. Just as I suspected, Hiiragi, you have a talent for magic.”

I had no idea what the basis for that assessment was, but as she said it, the corners of her mouth turned upwards happily.

“Didn’t you just say that I had no magic resistance or something?”

“That’s exactly why you’re talented! There isn’t a direct causal relationship, but it’s really easy for a person like that to become a magus if they spend time around another magus.”

“Huh...”

“Even an unenthusiastic response like that is okey-dokey! I get the feeling you have no idea what I’m talking about, but that’s fine! I’ll teach you magic,

starting from some super-basic runes! Once you start getting some hands-on experience, you should start picking it up like that!”

I still had no idea how to respond, so for the time being I just set the loafers I had been holding for some time on the floor.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t properly introduced myself yet, huh. I’m Miki Kouzuki from class 1-3. Nice to meet you~”

“...I’m Kouta Hiiragi from class 1-2.”

“Oh, I know. Nice to meet you!”

With a carefree smile, Kouzuki presented her hand.

When I naturally responded in kind, Kouzuki clasped my hand tightly as if refusing to let it escape. Between the sensation of her soft hand against mine and her charming smile, I could feel my heart pounding in my chest.

You could hardly blame me, right? If not for her comments about magic and such, Kouzuki’s beauty would be sure to make her popular even within her own sex.

“...Is it ok if I go now, Kouzuki?”

“Oh, that won’t do. Please, call me by my first name. A nickname would do too.”

I’d never before called a woman by either their first name or a nickname. Was my first time going to be taken in this girl who I’d met through the conversational equivalent of a fender-bender?

...It was, wasn’t it. I was the type of person who tended to go with the flow.

“Given names are similar to incantations, you see. Calling someone by their last name generates magic too. If we do that, we’ll be cursed to never quite be friends. With me so far?”

I was in fact not with her. All I was picking up was she didn’t want me to call her by her last name. But that would have to be good enough.

“Miki, then?”

“Hmm... it still feels a bit off... but I guess it just barely passes muster. As for

you, Kouta, I guess you'd probably be opposed to having a girl suddenly talk to you too familiarly. We can get to that point gradually."

It seemed she was capable of at least that level of forethought.

"Now then, could you give me your phone number and LINE ID?"

As instructed, I exchange contact information with her. Under normal circumstances, this might look like something to be envious of. But while it might seem that way on the surface, it's a different matter when the other party is the kind of troublemaker who would call themselves a magus. That's the conclusion I arrived at.

While putting on a pretense of indifference, Kouzuki asked me this without taking her eyes from the phone screen: "Kouta, you think of yourself as pretty normal, right?"

Of course.

"Because you aren't. Magic aside, even now you seem out of place."

"I mean, people say that I'm unambitious..."

"This is on a whole 'nother level, though."

I had no intention of getting any more involved than I already was, so this line of discussion held no interest for me. After I registered the user with the handle "Magus" as a friend on LINE, I assumed that the conversation had reached its conclusion, so I finished putting on my loafers.

"Umm, can I leave now?"

"Oh, hold on a sec. I left my bag in the classroom, so let me go grab it real quick."

As my mouth hung open like a dunce, Kouzuki flashed a mischievous smile.

"I'm leaving with you, of course. Didn't I just say that I would protect you?"

As she said that, she nudged my shoulder innocently.

And that was how my first time going home from school with a girl, which I had been eagerly looking forward to since the moment I enrolled, was stolen by a self-proclaimed magus.

The following day, Friday the 19th.

It was morning, just before homeroom. I leaned back in my chair, exhausted from my unusual experience the day before. Getting to know new people always tends to wear me out, but when that person happened to not only be a beautiful, high-spirited girl but also a self-proclaimed magus I suspect nearly anyone would be drained afterwards.

As I lifted my head from my desk, I could see chalk dust falling from the rim of the blackboard and fluttering throughout the classroom. It gets cleaned every day, so it's probably just my imagination, but this ancient, not-up-to-code building seemed oddly dark and dusty.

I recounted the previous day's strange events to my friend, who was sitting in the seat in front of me with his head on his desk. After halfheartedly listening to my tale, he said this once I finished.

"Normally ya'd just assume she has the hots for ya, Kou."

With his eyes half-closed, Masato Yahara lazily gave me a blunt response. Blunt as it was, though, it seemed he had taken interest in my story. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have even bothered replying.

At our traditionalist high school, Masato's bleached brown hair and perm were in clear violation of the dress code. And his transgressions didn't stop there; he also regularly smoked and shoplifted. On looks alone it wouldn't be strange if he were a member of a certain well-known idol group, but his attitude revealed a level of delinquency such that none of the other students would dare get near him.

"But Miki isn't exactly normal, right?"

"You ain't wrong; that chick's fucked up in the head. You sure she's not just gonna kill you as some ritual sacrifice?"

He laughed cynically. But I was used to this personality of his.

"Kill me? It's not like she's you or anything."

"I don't fuckin' get it. She's gotta have some ulterior motive. If she was

normal, I could chalk it up to a sad attempt to get your attention, but that's not necessarily the case with her. Whatever she wants to do to you, it might be something completely out of left field."

Masato jabbed me with his thumb.

"But even though you get the same feeling, you're not going to be able to turn her down, are ya?"

I couldn't deny it. I was non-confrontational by nature, after all.

"Hey, may as well make the best of it, right? Hell, if nothing else, you'll be able to spend your adult life bragging that you spent your high school days hanging out with a hot chick."

As it didn't directly affect him, Masato's advice might seem rather irresponsible.

However, he was rarely off the mark when it came to stuff like this. He had a good head on his shoulders, and his hunches tended to be astute. Although most of what came out of his mouth was extreme, if you ignored his generally dubious manner of speaking what you were left with was fairly insightful.

A sacrifice, huh.

It was scary how plausible that seemed.

As I buried my head in my arms, Masato suddenly dropped his gaze from me, and muttered,

"Ahh... I wanna kill someone."

This was something of a catchphrase of his. Whenever there was a lull in the conversation, he would murmur this as if he were remembering something. Although it wasn't exactly a praiseworthy habit, if I paid him any heed it would likely just drive a rift between us.

"Still, for her to make a move on you without even knowing you... looks like our girl Miki Kouzuki's oddity puts the rumors to shame. Just *talking* about magic is one thing, but the kind of person who'd graduate to actually *doing* something ain't exactly a dime a dozen."

"You know, the two of you are weird in oddly similar ways."

“Kouzuki and I are?”

Masato frowned, then pondered for a moment. But before long, he replied with an uncharacteristically serious expression.

“Nah, we aren’t.”

“You’re not?”

“We just aren’t. In fact, we’d probably get along like cats and dogs.”

I didn’t quite follow, but given Masato’s intuitive prowess I had no reason to doubt him.

As our conversation wound down, the morning bell began to ring. Although our school had a bell that signaled that homeroom would begin shortly, I’d never seen it have much effect on the other classes. Until the moment the homeroom teacher walked in the door, the students would generally continue chatting and milling about.

But our class was different.

“Everyone, note that the bell has rung. I would appreciate it if you took your seats.”

The class representative, Shuuichi Akiyama, issued an order. Although the rest of the class balked at the prospect of accepting direction from a fellow student, they didn’t feel it was an issue worth fighting over and quickly fell in line. That was simply how our class operated.

Masato hated that arrangement from the bottom of his heart.

“Hell, if it gets down to it, our relationship might become like mine and that fucker’s.”

“Like yours and the class rep’s? No way.”

Masato and Akiyama were on poor terms. Although delinquents and honor students seldom got along well, it was common for the two groups to intentionally avoid interacting and to simply ignore the other.

But these two were constantly at each other's throats, making their disdain for the other clear.

Let's turn the clock back a month to April 19th for a moment. Much like today, Akiyama took it upon himself to act in the teacher's stead, to which Masato vehemently resisted. Slamming his desk to drive his point home, Masato declared, in a voice dripping with contempt:

"You make me fuckin' sick."

I, along with the rest of the class, froze. To be completely honest, the rest of us also found something about Akiyama a little bit off-putting. However, his actions were objectively exemplary, so nobody could find a reason to reproach him. We had no legitimate reason to be cautious around him.

But Masato simply gave voice to his revulsion, offering no reasoning. I would be lying if I said I didn't find it a little refreshing, but Masato had clearly taken it too far.

Normally, an honor student like Akiyama would be unused to such violent outbursts. I was certain that Akiyama would be frightened and atrophy in the face of such a verbal blow.

Which is why I was more surprised by Akiyama's response than by Masato's outburst.

"And what of it, may I ask?"

Rather than falter, Akiyama struck back defiantly. I was half concerned that Masato would lose his temper and the argument would devolve into a fistfight.

But instead of leaping at Akiyama, Masato just muttered "go figure" to himself with a disdainful look on his face. Unlike the rest of us, it seemed he anticipated Akiyama's response. Glaring at Akiyama with eyes that gave the sense they were gazing at filth, Masato ended his tirade with "You're beyond help," and returned to his seat without causing any more commotion. Fortunately, things hadn't gotten out of hand.

For his part, although he said no more, Akiyama was able to clearly convey his contempt for the delinquent Masato. But because Masato didn't press the issue further, neither did he.

From that point on, their relationship had been akin to a lit powder keg.

“Akiyama and I are like opposites.”

Casting a sidelong glance at Akiyama, Masato smiled contemptuously.

“In what way?”

“Y’know, one of us desires chains, the other rejects them.”

I tilted my head in puzzlement.

“Don’t worry about it. Hell, don’t even think about it. No good’ll come of you overworking that poor brain of yours.”

“Are you calling me stupid?”

“Stupid is as stupid does, Kou. Just try to empty out that head of yours.”

“You’re awful.”

Although he says that, I know he doesn’t actually hate me. I’m so used to it that it doesn’t even bother me anymore.

“Well, for now, you should probably figure out how to dodge Kouzuki’s weird-ass solicitations. You know she’s probably gonna come after you again, right?”

Just as Masato predicted, Miki made her way to our classroom just as the fourth period ended. Entering an unfamiliar classroom is often cause for nervousness, but I didn’t pick up on any whatsoever from Miki.

“Welp, let’s get going!”

Grasping my hand, Miki gave it a tug. I didn’t need an explanation to see that she had no intention of letting me refuse.

I could feel the collective gaze of my classmates boring down on me. I couldn’t blame them. Her reputation as an eccentric aside, Miki Kouzuki was widely hailed as the cutest girl in our school. Yet someone like that was calling my name and grasping my hand, even though I had no notable characteristics to my name other than my relationship with Masato.

“H...hold on a second!”

If I put myself at her mercy, I would no doubt find myself the victim of my peers’ boundless curiosity. My peaceful life would be shattered.

Planting myself in place, I stopped Miki.

“Don’t get all rebellious with me, Kouta! I’m doing this whole bodyguard thing for free, you know. The least you could do is be a little more obedient.”

“At least explain what you’re planning on doing with me!”

“I called for you during lunch, so isn’t it obvious that we’re going to eat together? Use your head! It’s because you’re like that that you don’t have any magic resistance.”

For some reason, she scolded me in earnest.

I felt that I should be the one scolding her for her audacity and lack of common sense, but I suspected that my rebuttal would fall on deaf ears. I could almost picture it.

Releasing my hand for a moment, Miki pulled out two picturesque yellow lunchboxes and displayed them to me proudly.

“Behold, two lunchboxes made personally by my cute self! Consider yourself lucky!”

“Well, I guess it would be hard to argue that you aren’t cute...”

Upon hearing this, Miki put both hands on her cheeks and displayed a bashful expression.

“He called me cute! C’mon, I promise they taste good.”

She pounded on my back exuberantly. She was making a racket, and her acting sucks. Given her reaction, she must be completely used to being called cute.

“Let’s go to the courtyard!”

I could no longer muster the energy to resist Miki, who had begun pulling me along once more. My classmates’ inquisitive eyes were no doubt still on me, but... oh, whatever. Peace at any price, right?

Masato, who was watching us out of the corner of his eye, made no move to lend me assistance, instead just putting on the same cynical grin as always and gently waving me goodbye.

Although it was, in fact, a courtyard, it wasn't the type of place you could easily envision students gathering or eating lunch at. It was simply a poorly-maintained lawn with a few apologetic-looking shrubs, without even so much as a bench to its name. As a result, the two of us were alone aside from the occasional passerby.

Ours was a rural public high school that often used tradition as an excuse to avoid change and fundamentally rejected the idea of a vibrant adolescence. Both the courtyard and the old-fashioned building served to bore us into submission.

The clearest symbol of that was the uniforms. Despite being widely regarded as unfashionable by the students, our school still used black gakuran^[1] and black sailor uniforms of old.

Clearly in a bubbly mood, Miki laid a sheet she had brought on the unkempt lawn and took a seat. I followed suit.

"Is eating lunch together part of my becoming a magus too?"

"Yeah, pretty much. That's about right."

By eating her homemade lunch, I could become a magus.

When I put it like that, the causal relationship felt a little dubious. I unconsciously let out a sigh.

"Are you going to make me eat lizard tails or something?"

"What are you talking about? This isn't a Witches' Sabbath or anything like that, you know."

I wanted to ask what exactly a Witches' Sabbath *was*, but I realized that if I got hung up on everything she said our conversation would go nowhere.

"Of course, I don't really expect you to believe me when I say that eating lunch together will help you become a magus."

Pouting a little, Miki passed me one of the boxes. Upon opening the lid, I found... well, to be frank, everything inside looks perfectly innocuous. Nothing inside seemed to be magic-related, nor did anything seem like it was made with

a loved one in mind. It was, all in all, an extremely normal lunch.

How anticlimactic.

“Hey, let me guess what you’re thinking right now!”

Miki brought her face close to mine as if investigating something.

“Be my guest.”

“You’re thrilled at the prospect of eating a cute girl’s homemade lunch!”

“What? That’s completely off. I was just thinking how anticlimactic it was.”

“You’re awful!”

Although now that she mentioned it, eating a girl’s homemade lunch was a part of adolescence I had been looking forward to. Miki had stolen yet another of my firsts.

“But being able to speak your mind like that is a step in the right direction! Keep it up, keep it up!”

For some reason, I was being encouraged.

Her wide eyes gazed straight into mine as she spoke. That was probably how she truly felt.

If that’s how seriously she was taking this, I felt that I should do my part to understand this whole magic thing.

“In that case, I’ll ask you... you see, I’m a little confused. I don’t really understand what you mean when you say ‘magic’. After all, even though you sometimes borrow their terminology, your magic isn’t exactly like the stuff you’d find in fantasy novels, right?”

The whole time I was talking, Miki continued watching me with those large round eyes of hers. Feeling uncomfortable, I dropped my gaze.

“I don’t really understand it, but I can’t just unconditionally accept it. At this rate, I might not ever be able to use magic.”

Miki was listening to me earnestly.

Upon hearing my denial of magic, would she take offence?

But Miki's disposition didn't sour. She quietly pierced a piece of freezer-aisle karaage with her fork.

"You know, I've been dragging you around and saying some pretty confusing things. I'm the reason you're so confused. I have at least that much self-awareness."

My eyes still downcast, she spoke again.

"Do you hate me for that?"

In response, I quickly shook my head.

"I mean, you're doing it all with good intentions, right?"

Miki's eyes widened slightly as if in surprise.

"You understood that?"

"Yeah."

"Even though I was saying cryptic things, like that I'd protect you from magic or that I'd be your bodyguard?"

"Yeah."

"There's no way I was really conveying my good intentions by doing stuff like that..."

This time it was my turn to be surprised.

"So, you *did* realize you were being cryptic..."

If she realized how odd she was being, couldn't she have just acted more normally in the first place? If she was afraid that I would come to hate her, wouldn't it make sense to try getting to know me more normally?

"Well, 'cuz... it's like this. I had to take a gamble. The way I saw it, you were really in danger; someone else could have done you in with magic in the blink of an eye. That's why I was in such a rush – I had to, like, get really close to you as quick as possible so you'd trust me."

"And that's why you were walking home with me and making me lunch and stuff?"

“Yup. But you see, I knew you wouldn’t reject me. Given your lack of magic resistance, I was confident I could get away with a little bit of coercion.”

“You mean people without magic resistance are back at rejection?”

“Hmm... it’s not like that’s a rule or anything, but that’s generally how it turns out. Once the two of us have a strong bond of mutual trust, by that point you’ll already be a splendid magus. Once you get to that point, you’ll be able to protect yourself from other people’s magic.”

There was no way that was the whole truth.

However, I was pretty sure Miki wasn’t saying it halfheartedly. I could tell how serious and earnest she was being.

Although I still wasn’t fully clear as to what Miki’s brand of magic entailed, I got the feeling that it had a strongly grounded concept. If that was the case, I had to deal with it as sincerely as possible.

“You really are Kouta, aren’t you.”

Peering at my face, Miki laughed happily.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing... Hey, that’s right! We still haven’t eaten yet!”

I was puzzled, but we wouldn’t make any progress if I questioned every little thing she did or said. So I did as prompted and began to eat my lunch.

The lunch had a notably brown hue, and an ordinary pair of chopsticks was bundled along with it. Looking at it, it was obvious the creator wasn’t used to cooking. And most of the items were store-bought. Well, it looked edible, if nothing else.

“Oh no... this is terrible...”

Miki, who was sitting beside me and picking at the same assortment of side dishes, clutched the sides of her head.

“I... think it’s pretty average, don’t you?”

“...Sorry. I messed up. You see, I’m actually pretty handy, and I can do most things pretty well. But this is... man, these carrots are too firm... and half of this

is undercooked... Oh geez, I'm really sorry."

"Couldn't you use magic to make it better?"

"Excuse me? Are you just trying to pick a fight with me like that? You're picking a fight, aren't you?"

Grabbing my shoulder, she started shaking me back and forth. My head rattled from side to side. Miki seemed to find this amusing, and with a grin on her face refused to stop.

"You two look like you're having a blast, for a couple of freshman shitstains."

With a start, Miki turned to face the source of the malice-filled voice.

Sauntering towards us was a third year with long blond hair and dark roots. Although his fashion sense immediately outed him as a delinquent, his degeneracy didn't seem nearly as refined as Masato's. I quickly discerned that what set him off was seeing an unassuming guy like me eating lunch with a world-class girl like Miki.

The long-haired blond, who by now was beside us, looked down at Miki with the vulgar eyes of a small-time brute.

"Now that I look atcha up close, you're hella fuckin' hot."

"...Thank you."

"Hey, wanna go for a drive with me next Sunday? I just got my license, so I wanna hit the road."

"I appreciate your kind invitation. Unfortunately, I'm afraid I'm busy that day."

Putting on a sweetly smile, Miki diplomatically declined. I was impressed that someone as audacious as her could respond like that.

Although the long-haired blond initially narrowed his eyes in irritation, as he continued casting his viscous gaze at Miki, a crude smile began to slowly dance around his lips.

"Man, normally this is where I'd back off, but... You're so damn hot I just can't. I think I've fallen for ya already. Fuck, man, you gotta go out with me!"

Upon hearing this, Miki's poker face broke down for the first time, and she grimaced.

"C'mon, you can't just leave a guy hangin' like that! ...Oh, that reminds me. You mind if I switch topics for a sec? You wouldn't think a guy like me would give a shit, but I actually can't fuckin' stand people who disrespect public morals. I'm always thinkin' about how I wanna stamp guys like that out. It's like, uh, one of those world peace-type things."

Although he was clearly violating several school regulations himself, he continued his speech.

"So the other day, right, I see these two second-years named Takahashi and Shinjou gettin' it on after class. Man, my sense of justice flared up like you wouldn't fucking believe. The campus is sacred, ya know, you can't just go dirty it up by having sex here! And I'm like, I can't just sit here and watch this. So I was thinkin', the best thing to do would be to get them to break up. That shit's what they call an illicit sexual relationship, man. So I brought over a couple of my buddies and we broke them up. But chicks are like, they can't bear it if they don't have a boyfriend, right? I felt super bad for her. Me and my buddies were worried Shinjou'd be all lonely, so to prevent that we decided to take turns being her lover. Well, until we got bored of her body, at least."

This was bad. I may have called him a small-time brute, but it looked like I had underestimated his deviancy.

And unfortunately, I was a far cry from some protagonist who could easily take down a small fry; I was Student A, who was at his wit's end at the mere sight of a delinquent.

"I'm like a demon who uphold the public morals. Looks like I might have to do the same thing here, huh."

"Well... the two of us weren't doing anything untoward."

Although her reply was stout-hearted, Miki's voice was trembling. It seemed that she too could do nothing but tremble, no matter how unrefined this delinquent's brand of violence was.

"I guess you're right. Well, I can let off the hook for becoming my lover this

time. But ya gotta at least spend an evening with me. If you don't, I get the feeling that your boyfriend there won't be able to make it to school anymore... So, let me ask again."

Having established just how dangerous he was, the long-haired blond asked again.

"You'll go for a drive with me, won'tcha?"

"...If you insist."

Miki answered him expressionlessly.

When I looked at her face, she was smiling.

"Don't worry about me, Kouta. I'm a magus, I'm sure I can manage."

There's no way that was true. If she could use magic to do something about this situation, she would have done so already. And there's no way she would be trembling so much.

"Oh yeah, I should clear it with your boyfriend. We all good?"

"I'm thinking."

Frowning, I crossed my arms.

"By the way, is it really true that you want to make friends with Miki?"

"Hah?"

"I understand the desire to fulfill your sexual desires, I really do. I understand how strongly a person would want to have sex with a cute girl. But... if we compare how much you *do* want to how much Miki *doesn't* want to, Miki's desire not to is stronger. That's the way I see it. So I'd really rather you didn't."

For some reason, the long-haired blond seemed taken aback.

"The fuck is this kid talking about?"

You asked "we all good?", so I answered. That's all there is to it...

It was clearly my job to stop him. Although I had only just met Miki, she was taking action on my behalf. But if I tried to oppose him with violence, I would just be met in kind and thoroughly outclassed. I had to consider retribution, as

well. So what options did I have left?

For some reason, Masato's catchphrase sprung to mind.

I wanna kill someone.

"Ryuusuke Yamazaki."

I then heard a voice that belonged to the same person the catchphrase did. Although he wasn't raising his voice, I could hear it from somewhere above me.

When I looked up, I could see Masato staring at us expressionlessly from the second-floor hallway window.

Masato pointed at me and spoke succinctly.

"He's with me."

Succinct as it was, that was sufficient for the blond, who was apparently named Yamazaki, to display an uncomfortable look on his face.

"...Hey, Yahara. Didn't know this capybara-lookin' kid was a friend of yours. It's not like I was tryin' to pick a fight with a buddy of yours or anythin'."

"Uh huh."

With a bored look on his face, Masato wandered away from the window.

Yamazaki was a vicious delinquent who casually terrorized the rest of the student body. But in spite of this, he seemed unable to turn on Masato despite the latter being a first-year.

It seemed I had unintentionally made friends in high places.

Scratching his head and frowning, Yamazaki whispered in my ear.

"If Masato's sticking up for you, does that mean you're the 'manager' I've heard so much about? Are you in the middle of 'stocking up'?"

I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Well, no skin off my back. If you get any cute girls in, send 'em my way, wouldja?"

Giving my back a firm thump, Yamazaki quickly strode off.

I turned to face Miki.

“Kouta.”

Rather than being relieved, Miki stared intently at my face. I had never seen her look this scared.

“I thought I understood, but you really are... Kouta, aren't you. You really just see things the way they are.”

That's... unlike her previous statements about “magic resistance,” that's a little easier to understand.

“Look, I know he saved us this time around. And I'm sorry, but there's something I have to say.”

Miki peered into my eyes.

“Please don't spend any more time around that guy. I'd like you to also avoid that Yamazaki guy from just now, and a second-year named Matsumi too.”

I had no intention of breaking ties with Masato, so for now I just nodded.

But as if picking up on my noncommittal response, Miki heaved a heavy sigh.

“I really do need to protect you.”

Protect.

Let's suppose for a moment that magic really was something capable of protecting me. Let's suppose it's something that could enrich my life.

Even if that's the case, there's something I can't tell Miki.

I couldn't really care less.

I couldn't care less what happens to me.

I can't really remember how I got to know Masato. We sat near each other in class, and before I knew it we were regularly chatting.

But I didn't spend time with him outside of school. We never hung out together, and we didn't chat on the phone. If we got put into different classes,

it's entirely possible we would stop interacting altogether. Barring that, even not sitting near each other might be enough to put a halt to our conversations.

But once, I think it was about two weeks ago? He called me to a park near my home at one in the morning.

Masato wouldn't tell me, so I didn't know what was going on, but when I got there I was startled by how haggard he seemed. I got the impression that it didn't matter who, he just needed someone to talk to.

Atop a rusting jungle gym with an out-of-order sign plastered on it, the two of us held a rather aimless conversation. After glancing at the "no balls allowed" sign, the out-of-order vending machine, and the rather unenticing public restroom for the dozenth time, Masato gave an obviously fake laugh and quipped, "This fucking place is less a park and more of a cesspit."

Atop the jungle gym, Masato took a drag from his cigarette as he toyed with a butterfly knife. Although he was a minor, he was no stranger to cigarettes, beer, and occasionally even harder drugs. However, he never offered me any. And even when he was engaging in such antisocial practices, he showed not a glimpse of enjoyment but the same bored expression as always.

The moon was so full that night I thought it might perhaps be a supermoon^[2], and its illumination was clearly making Masato uncomfortable.

"Kou, whaddya see when you look up at the moon?"

I answered automatically.

"A rabbit.^[3]"

"You're just saying that 'cause everyone else does, right? Let's be real, it doesn't even look that much like a fucking rabbit."

He was totally right. Looking back up at the moon again, I completely agreed.

"So what do *you* see?"

I generally tried to avoid answering questions like this, as I inevitably got mocked for my lack of imagination.

"To be blunt, the moon doesn't look like much of anything to me."

“Whaddya mean?”

“I mean, I can’t really see the craters as anything but craters.”

But rather than mock me for my entirely mockable answer, Masato looked almost impressed.

“Huh, so that’s your angle.”

Seeming pleased, he lit another cigarette.

“Makes sense. Hell, if anything it’s weirder to assign meaning to shit like that.”

I wasn’t sure what he was so pleased about.

To fill the lull in the conversation, I asked a question of little import.

“Masato, why do you act like a delinquent?”

“You’re a cheeky little bastard. Normally if you asked a delinquent that, they’d beat you senseless.”

But Masato gave me a serious answer.

“I just didn’t know a way to resist it.”

It wasn’t a very concrete answer. But I could tell that Masato himself didn’t have anything firmer.

The conversation died down again, so I asked the next question that came to mind as I gazed upwards.

“What does the moon look like to you, Masato?”

Furrowing his brow, Masato tossed his cigarette aside.

“Whenever I look up, I get uneasy. Even though I know I can’t reach it, I wanna smash it. So on bright nights like these, I always just look at my feet.”

He put a new cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

“Feels like there’s a monster baring its fangs above me.”

Wrenching his face in despair, Masato whispered as if he were spitting out a mouthful of blood.



“Ahh... I wanna kill someone.”

“It’s been a while since we walked home together, Masato.”

We hadn’t planned it ahead of time. But our houses were in the same direction, and we were both in the so-called going home club, so we occasionally found ourselves walking together. The reason it had been so long was due to a certain magus attaching herself to my hip.

By the way, the magus in question had been invited somewhere today by her friend Sayuri, who apparently wouldn’t take no for an answer. Although I was surprised that Miki was able to make friends at all in the face of her blatant audacity, it turned out she was actually on good terms with most of the girls in her class. Of course, this was self-reported, so I had no way of confirming whether it was true or not.

By the way, when I expressed my surprise at the size of her friend group, Miki got rather indignant. She then went on an incomprehensible lecture about how

maintaining the unstable bonds of female friendship was part of magic's wheelhouse or something. Well, her communication skills were exceptional, so perhaps it wasn't so strange after all.

"You're thinking about that chick again, aren'tcha. You're fucking engrossed."

"Kinda."

"You're supposed to deny it, man, I'm just fucking with you."

After letting him know that I had, in fact, been thinking about her, Masato gave off a sigh while smirking.

"Go figure."

Without breaking his smirk, Masato continued.

"Ya know, that magus freak told me to stay away from you the other day."

"Really? Miki did?"

Masato's eyes reflected their assent.

"I told you, right? Kouzuki and I will never get along. She fucking hates me."

That reminded me. Miki *had* told me to stop spending time with Masato.

"Are you sure you didn't just make fun of magic or something?"

"I might've."

"C'mon!"

"But this and that don't have jack shit to do with each other. She just can't stand the two of us being around each other."

The word "jealousy" sprung to mind, but Miki had really just been one-sidedly meddling in my affairs.

All she could think about was magic.

"I guess you being around me gets in the way of her plan to make me into a magus?"

"That's pretty much on the mark."

I was surprised at Masato's matter-of-fact answer.

“Wait, do you understand what she means by ‘magic’? Is that why you can tell why she hates you?”

Masato’s brows furrowed.

“Hmm... it’s not like I understand it per se. But us not being able to see eye-to-eye shakes out to about the same thing.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“I mean, you’re starting to get an idea of what her magic is, right? She’s been dragging you around for two damn weeks now.”

“...Sort of.”

“Vaguely” was about the level my understanding capped out at.

It was just like translating English into Japanese; coming up with a word to describe magic was difficult. But I could tell by now that it wasn’t “sorcery” or “witchcraft”.

As far as I could tell, the kind of magic Miki was talking about generally referred to something along the lines of “imposition of notions.”

But it wasn’t just brainwashing, where you could impose things forcibly. Things like daily habits and cultural norms, where they took root before you even noticed, were also included in her definition of magic. Miki’s vision of a magus was likely someone who could freely manipulate the notions of others. When she said I didn’t have any magic resistance, what she meant was that I was in danger because my notions would change so readily.

But I couldn’t understand what made people without magic resistance better at becoming magi. I didn’t see why spend time around Masato would keep me from becoming one, either. I felt like there was still quite a bit to magic that I didn’t understand.

“Quit thinkin’.”

Speaking rudely, Masato lightly jabbed my solar plexus.

“No good’ll come of a dumbass thinking too hard.”

“Surely there’s a kinder way to put that.”

Masato tilted his head with a playful look on his face. But just as I was thinking that, his expression grew grave.

“Honestly, some of the stuff Kouzuki’s talkin’ about has merit. Even I’d rather you go be a happy-go-lucky magus freak than a homicidal delinquent.”

“What? I mean, I’d really rather not become either...”

I responded with a light-hearted joke, but Masato’s intense expression didn’t fade.

“Well, if you don’t think about it too much you can probably stay just the way you are.”

“Kusukusu...kusukusukusu...”

We heard a peculiar laugh that sounded as if someone were exhaling through a gap in their teeth.

The two of us turned our heads. Behind us stood a short girl. Her jet-black hair hung down in braids in the back, with her bangs were cut at a diagonal slant. I could infer from her sailor uniform’s green ribbon that she was a second-year. While that meant that she was older than us, her childlike face gave off a very different impression. That, combined with her innocent expression, would have led me to believe in an instant if I were told she was a grade-schooler. Upon closer inspection, though, her bust was large enough to leave a thoroughly immoral impression.

But her most notable characteristic was her peculiar eyes. Although they were as just as black as her hair, they seemed somehow out of focus and were oddly reminiscent of a rainbow.

“You two are quite interesting.”

There was nobody else around, so it seemed the unfamiliar upperclassman was addressing us.

“Hello.”

With the expression of a pleased child, she gave a quick bow. I returned the greeting.

“...Masato, do you know her?”

Pulling a wry face, Masato shook his head.

“Kusukusu... you really *are* interesting!”

Her smile was innocent. But it was strange. In fact, it was so innocent, it was unsettling.

“Whaddya want?”

Masato spit out the question in his usual aggressive manner, but the upperclassman showed no sign of fear. Nor did she even seem to mind. It seemed like she was a bit slow when it came to interpreting other people’s emotions.

“Oh, Ririko was just thinking how she wanted to become good friends with Hiiragi!”

It seemed she knew my last name.

Although she had called us “interesting,” I quickly realized that she was paying little attention to us. Her gaze seemed to be drifting all over.

“What did you find so interesting? Our conversation?”

“Yes. Aaaand no.”

Her voice dripped with saccharine. But it wasn’t the type of flirtatious saccharine that Miki occasionally put on for play.

It was like a child’s. Not just that, but her behavior and expressions were like those of a child as well.

“What’s so interesting about you two are the call signs you’re giving off.”

“...Call signs?”

“Yup. Call signs.”

Although I parroted her words back at her, no explanation was forthcoming. It felt as though she thought her manner of speaking were the most natural thing in the world.

As if striking upon something, Masato suddenly asked her a question.

“Hey, are you that Ririko Matsumi chick?”

“Oh, yes. Ririko is Ririko, of course.”

Without any questions as to how Masato knew her name, the upperclassman named Ririko Matsumi nodded.

“Masato, who is she?”

“Her name gets around. You can guess why, right?”

Indeed. If this was representative of her standard behavior, it was no surprise that people would have heard of her.

Oh, right. Now I think about it, “Matsumi” was also on the list of people Miki told me to stay away from. And on top of that, I vaguely remembered hearing rumors about her somewhere.

“Interesting, aren’t they? White and ultramarine, huh. Aren’t most people orange? But you two are different. Ririko likes white, you know. Makes her want to do something.”

Unable to contain her excitement, Matsumi-senpai continued.

“Hey, hey, can Ririko read you?”

“Read me?”

I parroted her words again.

“Oh, that’s right. Most people can’t do scanning. But, but, you see, Ririko can do scanning!”

Puffing up her chest proudly, she spread her hands as if to say “here I go!”

In a flash, her innocent expression vanished.

It was replaced with something inhuman, almost mannequin-like.

A strange voice. A voice that couldn’t quite be said to be coming from her throat. The noise sounded exactly like that of a machine, but it was clearly emanating from her half-open mouth.

As if being infiltrated by darkness, her eyes slowly lost their light. They lost their focus and seemed to stop perceiving altogether. But I could tell. Even though they were out of focus, they were holding me tight in their gaze and refusing to let go. As if I were afflicted with paralysis, I was unable to so much as

wiggle a fingertip.

What was going on?

Still frozen in shock, I could see Masato out of the corner of my eye. Although Masato despised other people showing weakness around him, he was simply staring speechless.

Everything about this was abnormal.

“Beep bibibi, bip bip bibeep.”

As if it were travelling not through my eardrums but through my bones, I could feel the noise resound within my body. I couldn't tell where it was coming from anymore. Coming not from in front of me, nor behind me, nor beside me or above me, that mechanical noise simply wrapped around me and continued resonating.

Beep bibibi, bip bip bibeep.

The noise rang in concert with my very cells. My entire body trembled with stinging pain, almost as if I were being scalded.

I still couldn't move my legs. I couldn't move at all. It had transformed from paralysis into sheer violence. A paralysis so strong it felt as though my body were bound with electric cables. Cables that both bound me and tore me to pieces. They exposed me, comprehended me, bound up my insides and scattered them.

While exposing my everything, those eyes continued holding me. Capturing everything, yet reflecting nothing. Eyes that were both jet-black and snow white.

“Scanning complete.”

As Matsumi-senpai said that, the scenery returned and the world began turning once more. Of course, I knew that the scenery had never left. The only thing that had changed was me. For just that moment, the “me” who was able to perceive that scenery was changed.

Only a few seconds should have passed. But those seconds felt so dense that I would have believed if I was told that hours or even days had passed.

A breath.

Good... I took a breath.

I can still breathe.

“Well then, next up is...”

The innocent girl’s eyes turned to Masato.

“Ah—”

Masato’s eyes were wide open. I had never seen him like this before.

Matsumi-senpai’s eyes, which by now had returned to their original color, steadily became black and white again.

“...don’t.”

“Beep bi—”

“DON’T!!”

Masato screamed.

In response to his ragged breathing and scared demeanor, Matsumi-senpai lips began to quiver.

“You don’t have to shout like that, you know...”

Despite being the source of Masato’s terror, she simply pouted, seemingly as indifferent as ever to the emotions of others.

“Excuse me, Matsumi-senpai, what was that just now...?”

“Hold on, hold on. Ririko’s going to put it into words now.”

Matsumi-senpai stood still, her mouth hanging lazily half-open.

She stayed in that state for a little while, not so much as moving a muscle.

“Kouta Hiiragi, age fifteen.”

Still expressionless, her mouth began moving, and like a machine began speaking.

“Lives with his parents and younger sister. Lives in a room with a skylight on the second floor of an old single-family home. Has many friends, but no close

friends. Values emotional distance. Has recently begun courting a member of the opposite sex. Virgin. Gets tired when conversing with others. Largely apathetic towards himself.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. But as she went on, it became clear that she was talking about me.

“Unconsciously rejects his mother due to her hysterical temperament. Receives mixed messages from his father. Neither parent approaches parenting with any degree of consistency. His sister enjoys killing cats. Has been ordered by his family to deal with the cat corpses. Will listen to anything he is told. Susceptible to brainwashing. Versatile. Abnormally good at understanding the value systems of others. Has no self, so regards others with-”

“Th... that’s enough! Matsumi-senpai, please cut it out!”

I raised my voice, almost to a scream, and Matsumi-senpai, whose eyes had been open this whole time, finally blinked. Her expression began coming back.

“So? So? How was that? How’d you like my scanning? Did Ririko get that all right?”

She looked like a proud kindergartener asking how good her crayon drawing was. Knowing that it would make her happy, I decided to humor her and nodded vigorously.

I didn’t want to listen to this anymore.

I didn’t want to learn anything about myself.

“Senpai, can we go now?”

For some reason, Masato seemed exhausted.

“Whaaat? But Ririko wanted to chat more! He’s white, after all! He’s the only one!”

“Sorry, but we got places to be.”

“Ririko understands... Well, Ririko guesses it can’t be helped then.”

Matsumi-senpai’s shoulders slumped.

“Ririko guesses she’ll see you later then, Tanihara.”

His lips pursed, Masato scowled at Matsumi-senpai.

“Huh? Aren’t you Tanihara?”

“It’s read ‘Yahara’^[4], Senpai.”

“You’re kidding! Ririko wonders why she made that mistake... Ririko wonders if it’s because the scanning stopped partway? Oh, by the way! Ririko doesn’t normally make that kind of mistake! Ririko's normally always right!”

Waving both her hands, Matsumi-senpai gave an odd excuse.

But neither of us could muster the energy for a rebuttal, so we simply turned and walked away.

Walking in silence, we passed through a deserted shopping district, with almost half the stores shuttered up. I felt like my feet couldn’t quite reach the ground. I was filled with an unpleasant floating sensation.

What exactly *was* that “scanning”? Wasn’t that magic? And a foul magic at that, one that overturned every value I once held.

It felt like the world was shaking. Although there was no heat haze to speak of, I was having difficulty telling exactly where the ground was. It was as if I should have able to fly, but for some absurd reason the cracked concrete was shackling me to the earth.

Perhaps it was a childish delusion. But... that’s right. Ririko Matsumi had no such restrictions. And perhaps she was so absurd a person as to truly believe she could fly.

“Kou.”

Breaking the silence, Masato spoke.

“Get this through your head. Don’t talk to that birdbrain ever again. She’ll be a bad influence on you, got it?”

I wasn’t sure what harm a simple conversation could do, but Masato looked dead serious, so I just responded with a firm nod.

Honestly, I was surprised that Masato would show such concern for me. He

reminded me of Miki.

“Masato, did you understand what was going on with that scanning thing?”

“... not even a little.”

I see. So he had “not even a little” desire to explain it to me, huh.

But even knowing that, I didn’t feel the need to press the issue. If he didn’t want to tell me, it wasn’t like I could make him.

The traffic light in front of us turned red.

We stopped.

“Fuck.”

Masato spit out a small expletive and began chewing on his lip.

“What’s wrong?”

“Why the hell’d we stop?”

“The light was red, wasn’t it?”

“There’s no cars here.”

I looked both ways to verify his statement. Indeed, there were no automobiles in sight.

“...Then do you want to cross?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about... that’s not what I’m fucking talking about. I’m asking *why* I stopped.”

I was perplexed. What was Masato so irritated about?

“Well, red means stop, so obviously we’d stop, right?”

“Right. Even though we coulda crossed, we stopped just because *that’s how it works*.”

Masato began scratching at his head, almost as if he were trying to plug up his ears.

“Masato, is something the matter? Is it because of that upperclassman?”

“...Yeah, I guess. There’s something wrong with me right now. There’d have to

be for me to talk to you like this, huh.”

The light turned green.

“Masato, let’s go.”

“Right...”

As he began walking, I could see Masato’s expression surpass irritation and shift to rage. He was scratching at himself to an abnormal degree. The expression he was giving made it seem as if his entire body were swarming with caterpillars and they were digging under his skin to lay eggs.

With no change in demeanor, Masato spoke.

“Ahh... I wanna kill someone.”

I could tell.

We were past the point of no return.

The day after our encounter with Ririko Matsumi, Masato didn’t show up at school.

That wasn’t too strange in and of itself. Masato had skipped school twice in that past for little to no reason. But given the state he had been in yesterday, I couldn’t help but be concerned.

I wanna kill someone.

He was just saying it like he always did, right?

“Good morning, Kouta.”

I heard a voice I was now fairly used to. I turned my head and responded.

“Good morning, Miki.”

“...Yahara isn’t here today, huh.”

Her voice lacked its usual pluck. Her expression also seemed somewhat gloomy.

“What’s wrong? You seem out of sorts.”

“You can tell?”

Giving a weak smile, Miki heaved a sigh.

‘You can tell?’, huh.

It was obvious that she was wearing her lack of energy on her face to elicit my concern. But I kept that to myself and simply nodded.

“Would you mind coming to the courtyard with me, Kouta?”

“Right now?”

There wasn’t that much time left before class began.

“Yeah... there’s something I want to talk to you about, and I’d rather not be overheard.”

In other words, it was a matter of some importance. That was what Miki was trying to convey. She was extraordinarily skilled at conveying her intentions to others.

So I put on an obedient expression.

The sky was overcast and it looked liable to start raining at any moment, so the courtyard was unpleasantly chilly. The scent of earth mingled with the humidity, and I felt as though I might choke.

Regardless of the fact that she herself was the one who called us here, Miki simply hung her head in silence. It created an oddly docile atmosphere.

“Miki, what was it you wanted to talk about?”

Although I tried to break the ice, Miki still just cast her eyes down. Realizing that I should wait for her to speak, I did just that.

“...I’m really just a bother, aren’t I.”

That was the first thing that came out of her mouth.

“I’m not blind. I can at least tell that I’m a bother...”

“Um... what’s this, all of a sudden?”

Even if Miki had realized that she was being bothersome, she had gone to

some lengths to feign airheadedness and conceal it.

“I spent all day yesterday thinking about how I could deal with this without having to do something wrong.”

I wasn't sure what brought about this abrupt change of heart. All I knew was that I shouldn't point out the fact that it *was* a change of heart. If I did, Miki would become difficult to deal with.

Miki's eyes grew watery, and she seemed to put herself on guard.

As far as I was concerned, that was much more worrying than the actual words coming out of her mouth.

“What do you mean by something ‘wrong’?”

“Pushing magic on you would be wrong. I know that people laugh at me and call me delusional. But even so, I was trying to forcibly push my value system on you.”

I didn't really care about that. And Miki should have known that.

“But, you know... even though I knew what I was doing was wrong, I couldn't bear watching you turn into an insane magus! I just couldn't!”

Her eyes still moist, she spoke with conviction.

I couldn't say anything. As I still didn't fully comprehend magic, I couldn't understand what Miki was saying. But that aside, in the face of Miki's staunch earnestness, I felt it would be improper to interject, so I couldn't say anything.

“So I've been thinking.”

Miki took my right hand and embraced it in hers. My heart began pounding at the unexpected feel of her touch. Miki peered at me with teary eyes.

It felt very intentional. She was intentionally manipulating my heartrate. But in her eyes, I could see her slyness tinged with indecision.

Closing her eyes for the first time in some time, Miki let out a long sigh. I could feel her grip on my hand tighten ever-so-slightly.

...How strange. I felt a warmth other than simple body heat transfer from her hands to mine. If she told me that it was part of her magic, I wouldn't doubt it

for a second.

Miki opened her eyes again.

They were filled with resolution.

They seemed to be entreating me.

“Kouta... do you think you could fall for me?”

Her unexpected question left me speechless.

“Or is that impossible, I wonder...”

It was, quite clearly, a confession.

Perhaps to an outsider, confessing in this situation might seem completely natural. But as the party in question, I could tell how unhealthy it was.

After all, Miki was simply trying to protect me. It wasn't as if she held any romantic feelings towards me. I understood that much.

“Am I... no good?”

“Th... that's not it at all! You're extremely charming, Miki!”

Reflexively, I gave Miki the exact response she was looking for.

Of course, it was true that she was charming. Her looks would make her at home in any idol group, and although she was selfish, she had a timidly side to her that obsessively took the needs of the others into consideration as well.

But that was nothing more than an objective observation. What did I personally think of her?

To begin with...

Under what circumstances *would* I fall for a girl?

“Do you think you could fall for me?”

“That's...”

Even though I knew what answer she was looking for, I couldn't bring myself to say it.

“...Kouta, you're a guy, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“Even if you only want me for my body, if that’s enough to get you to fall for me, I’m... okay with that.”

Miki’s eyes then widened.

“S...sorry! I said something really weird! But... I really do want you to fall for me! Even if that’s what it takes!”

I couldn’t comprehend it. I couldn’t comprehend why she would go to such lengths.

...No, that’s not true. For the sake of magic, she would go to any lengths. She felt the need to do something about me and my lack of magic resistance. Even if it meant sacrificing her own chastity, she had to protect the notion of magic.

Miki wouldn’t be Miki if she didn’t abide by her magic.

But even recognizing that, I was still uneasy. Although I couldn’t put it to words, there was something that didn’t sit right with me.

There was one thing I was sure of, though. Regardless of how it looked, Miki sought me. Knowing that, how could I turn down her confession?

The answer was simple. I couldn’t.

“I will fall for you. So you don’t have to say weird stuff like that anymore.”

Miki’s eyes widened, and she stared straight at me.

“So you mean we’re going out now?”

“Yup.”

“You’re okay with this? I’m going to be your first girlfriend, right? Are you okay with it being me? You can’t take it back, you know that, right? You know you’ll take on my attribute, right?”

“Like I said, I’m fine with that.”

Before my eyes, Miki’s expression brightened.

“Really? You’re really okay with this? ...Yay. Yay!”

The teary expression she had been displaying up until a moment ago vanished

like it had never been there, and she broke into a radiant smile. Seeing it, I was convinced I had made the right decision and was filled with relief.

I was fine with this.

“Yay! Thanks so much, Kouta! I look forward to our continued times together!”

Miki merrily shook my hand up and down.

My discomfort didn't fade, but there was one thing I knew for sure. From now on, Miki and I would spend a great deal more time together. Little by little, we would stop holding back around each other. My days would be fulfilling, and I might even earn the jealousy of my peers. That was the shape my life would take from now on.

I recognized this, and accepted it without resistance.

Just according to Miki's script.

A week had passed since Miki's confession. Unsurprisingly, we had grown a good deal closer, but Miki hardly behaved as if we were lovers and instead treated me much the same as before. So I did the same.

But Miki the object of no small amount of attention. The fact that we were dating quickly became public and rapidly circulated throughout the school. Even if the way we treated each other didn't change, the way the people around us reacted did. Feeling cramped by the way the people around me forced their definitions onto us, even my awareness of our relationship began to gradually shift. Before long, pressure from the peanut gallery would likely transform us into a conventional boyfriend and girlfriend.

I see. So Miki formally asked me out knowing that this would happen.

“Well then, I look forward to another week together!”

“Yup. See you later.”

As we parted at the usual street, Miki exaggeratedly waved me goodbye. I smiled at her and returned the wave.

Miki and I had made plans to spend the day at her house on the Sunday of next week. Although she had said that her parents would be out of the house, I harbored no improper expectations. Or did I? What did I want to become of my relationship with Miki?

Honestly, there was something I was much more concerned about than our relationship.

Masato.

Masato still hadn't shown up at school. He wasn't returning my calls, and my LINE messages to him were marked unread. Dropping out of school would have been in-character for him, so his non-attendance wasn't strange in and of itself. But based on his demeanor from the last time we talked, I was concerned something bad had happened to him.

"You aren't with Tanihara today?"

Right, after we met the owner of that voice, Masato started acting strangely. The first time she showed up, his gears began coming undone.

With a childish smile, Ririko Matsumi ignored my stiff expression and spoke in a lively voice.

"Hello, Hiiragi!"

"...Hello. But Senpai, his name is Yahara, not Tanihara."

"Ah, right. It was, wasn't it."

Matsumi-senpai laughed, as if she were pleased about something.

"Do you live in this direction as well, Senpai?"

"Nope, Ririko chased after you because she wanted to chat! You seemed like you were having fun talking to Kouzuki, so Ririko decided not to interrupt you. Admirable of me, huh?"

It seemed she had decided to follow me.

"Mhm. You really are an interesting color, Hiiragi. But you're a little yellower than you were before. I wonder if that's Kouzuki's fault? Was it because you were flirting with her, maybe? I don't like it. I'd really rather you stayed white."

As always, she was off in her own world.

“Is Miki not an interesting color? After all, she’s quite the character.”

“Hmm. Having a bit of pink in you is rare and all, but I think I’ve seen a color like that before. Anyways, it’s not much to look at.”

Perhaps Miki was less of a character than I thought? I wasn’t really sure what to make of this whole call sign business.

“Ririko wanted to chat with Yahara as well, but she hasn’t seen him at all since then...”

“I haven’t seen him either. I don’t even know what he’s up to these days.”

For some reason, Matsumi-senpai tilted her head at those words.

“You don’t know what he’s up to? Even though you’re his friend? You don’t have awful reception, do you?”

“Reception?”

“Yeah, reception. ...Haven’t you heard of reception?”

I was of course familiar with the word, but the context Matsumi-senpai was using it in eluded me.

“Then do you want Ririko to look into it for you? She had to stop scanning him partway through, but... Ririko has pretty high fidelity, you see, so she thinks it’ll be okay! She can find Yahara!”

“You can find... you mean you know where he is?”

“Of course Ririko does! Ririko isn’t a child, you know!”

Apparently to Matsumi-senpai, not being able to do this reception thing was on the same level as not being able to ride a bike.

“Ah... but you don’t get reception, Hiiiragi? Umm... don’t worry! Ririko has times when she can’t really get a sense for it, either! Don’t let it get you down!”

For some reason I was being cheered up.

“Here, Ririko will go over the basics. See, there are these things floating around in the air, right? Ririko doesn’t really know what they’re called...

Particles? Electrons? Wi-Fi? Anyways, you have to catch a bunch of them on your body. It'll feel like they're sticking to your skin, you know? Next, they'll go like, bzzzt, and you'll start seeing a faint picture, and you have to focus on that picture reaaal carefully. But you already knew that, right?"

There was no way I could have known that, but I kept my comments to myself.

"But see, the next part's the tricky bit. Finding the picture you want's tough, right? When Ririko does it, she flies way up high. Ririko's really good at flying, so she can look out over the whole city. Then, it'll be something related to the information you want — so in this case, that would be something related to Yahara. Once you find that, the reception is complete!"

"...Did you say 'flying'?"

There were countless faults to pick with her explanation, so I chose the one I found most concerning.

"...? Flying in the sky, you know?"

It seemed my question fell on deaf ears. Apparently to Matsumi-senpai, being able to fly was just as obvious as being able to breathe.

"Alrighty, let's see if we can get reception."

As soon as she said that, it was like a switch flipped.

Those eyes again.

Those jet-black eyes, dripping with viscosity, appeared before me again.

"...Bzz bzz...bzz...bzzt...bzz..."

Noise filtered through her half-open mouth. Occasionally her shoulders would tremble slightly, as if she were convulsing.

Ah, this person's broken.

That was what I thought of her inner workings.

The first thing I was confident in was the fact that her value system didn't operate according to the same logic as the rest of humanity's. She had a culture all her own. Similar to worshippers in a cult, she put her faith in nonsensical

theories. She was closed off from the rest of the world, much too far away for any to reach. She lived in a lonely little world.

But in spite of that, her noise easily reached my ears.

An encroachment by her closed world.

Perhaps the sounds I initially thought meaningless were a kind of language. After all, the noise had a certain regularity to it. It wasn't nonsensical. The sound of "Bzz bzz bzz...bzzt bzzt...bzz" reverberated through my skin and sunk into my pores. Aggressively so. Forcefully so. It stung like a box cutter. In the face of such a blade, no doubt anyone would flee in pain.

But I couldn't run from it. I didn't know how to.

So instead, I tried to understand Ririko Matsumi.

The noise was touching me.

The noise was touching me.

I had to clearly envision it. I had to translate her world into an image I could comprehend.

It was a world where everything - the earth, the sea, the sky - was made of electrical cords. Cords of all lengths and sizes, wriggling like snakes, ferociously binding all of mankind. In that world, the cords were gleefully torturing me. The cords were forcibly invading my throat, my nostrils, my urethra, and my toenails and making them their own. It hurt. Stop it. I'm human!

Having envisioned enough, I shook my head vigorously and drove away the translated world.

"Ah...! Haa...haa..."

That was dangerous. If I had dove any deeper, Matsumi-senpai would have disassembled me and I'd have been taken over by her image. If that happened, I knew I wouldn't be able to return to normal.

Ah, I see. That's why both Miki and Masato told me to stay away from Matsumi-senpai.

"...Bzz...bzz.....huh?"

Color returned to Matsumi-senpai's eyes.

Taking a deep breath to calm my heart, I asked her.

"What happened?"

"Well... For some reason, Ririko couldn't get any reception. How odd... even if the scanning stopped halfway, she should have enough information to get reception..."

She looked rather sad.

"Ririko wonders if she's become awful at reception..."

She couldn't get reception.

Matsumi-senpai's proclamations were becoming less and less coherent. And yet her words filled me with a strange sense of dread.

"Does that happen often?"

"Not at all lately! Really! Th-that's why this is so odd! It's not Ririko's fault... probably...!"

Her head bobbed about like a child giving an excuse. It was hard to believe that she had simply failed. I could sense that her noise just now had had a proper regularity to it.

"If the fault doesn't lie with you, might there be some problem on Masato's side that's making the reception fail?"

"Ah, Ririko sees. That's probably it. Maybe Yahara's information was overwritten since Ririko scanned him the other day."

"His information was overwritten? Is that a thing that can happen?"

"Sometimes. You know the saying 'people can change,' right? So call signs themselves can change too."

If Masato's value system changed in such a span, could that have something to do with his inattendance?

What could he have done to make himself change so drastically?

Ahh... I wanna kill someone.

“...Ah.”

No, let's not be hasty. Even if, hypothetically, it was the result of Masato fulfilling that wish of his, could that really change a man with as strong of homicidal urges as him? ...Ahh, it might. Such a transient desire being put into a definite form could be said to be a change in and of itself.

"Hiiragi, you've been quiet for a while now. What's up?"

It was right in front of me.

I understood it now.

Her scanning wasn't some fantastical delusion, nor was her reception.

“Senpai, would you mind telling me Masato’s information from back when you scanned him?”

“Ririko doesn’t mind, but... the scanning was only half done, remember? It might be buggy. Is that okay?”

"Of course," I nodded.

“You got it. Let me just translate it into Japanese.”

As she said that, she stiffened down to her fingertips. By now I was used to this unblinking visage of hers.

Acclimatization. Was I acclimating again?

“Masato Tanihara, age 16.”

Once again, Matsumi-senpai mistook Masato's surname for "Tanihara". Perhaps in importing the data, Masato's name had been misinterpreted.

[illegible]

kill. Wants to kill. Wants to kill. Wants to kill. Wants to kill. Wants to kill. Wants
to kill. Wants to kill. Wants to kill. Wants to kill. Wants to kill—”

“Th-that’s enough!”

Something was clearly amiss, so I shook Matsumi-senpai by the shoulders. But like a broken record, she just kept saying “wants to kill.”

“Wants to kill... ah... aHh... wants to ahHH! Ah! Ahh! Stop! Make it stop!”

“S... Senpai!”

"It's filthy! Masato Tanihara is filthy! Why can't he just go crazy!?"

It was obvious from her exclamations that Matsumi-senpai was in agony. Her eyes no longer seemed mechanical, nor did they seem human.

They simply expressed pain.

“Wh... why...”

Those painful eyes stared straight at me.

“How can you stand to be around someone like him...?”

Seeing Matsumi-senpai like this, I felt like I could understand her a little better.

She was certainly operating under a different logical framework than the rest of us. But the person underneath all that was still human. If she forced herself to emulate something abnormal like that, her condition would quickly take a turn for the worse. An error would occur.

[illegible]

Letting out a shrill scream, she collapsed to the ground. Flopping around like an eel, she began vomiting.

“Senpai!”

Matsumi-senpai was writhing in a pool of her own vomit and convulsing erratically. A strange yellow fluid began oozing out of her tear glands. After convulsing a little longer, she eventually stopped moving altogether. She reminded me of a lizard tail that remained moving even after being severed.

“A... are you alright?”

I put some space between us before calling out to her, slightly alarmed by her bizarre behavior. She didn't respond, but I could tell that she was at least breathing. After hesitantly approaching her, I felt her wrist. Her pulse was accelerated, but not to the point where it seemed she would be in danger.

I called for an ambulance, and while looking after her, considered the question I had just been posed.

“How can I stand to be around him, huh?”

I would never say it out loud, let alone around Matsumi-senpai or Masato, but Masato was alone. His classmates were a given, but even his family held him at an arm's length. The more someone got to know him, the more they would realize that his madness was the real deal.

The reason I was around him... was simply because I couldn't leave, nothing more.

But...

“I'm probably the only person in the world like that.”

The week came and went, and Masato was still nowhere to be seen. Although I searched for him in my own way, I couldn't so much as find a clue.

Matsumi-senpai was still recuperating from her hospitalization and hadn't shown up at school either. There was something she had mentioned that I couldn't get out of my mind that I wanted to ask her about, but her absence made that impossible.

What caught my attention was a name that had come up in the scanning's translation.

The name “Shuuichi Akiyama.”

“You seem really restless today, Kouta.”

Miki remarked with a concerned frown.

“...Do I?”

“Yeah. It’s like you’re only half here.”

True to his diligent nature, Akiyama was always the first person to show up for class.

But as far as today went, Akiyama had yet to show up at school.

The man who Masato hated so intensely that his name came up in the scanning had yet to show up at school.

I was probably overthinking it. Even Akiyama could get sick, and it wasn’t inconceivable that he might simply oversleep.

Ahh... I wanna kill someone.

There’s no way.

There’s no way that’s the case.

“You *really* aren’t paying any attention. You’ve been glancing over at the door for forever.”

Having this called to my attention, I apologize to Miki.

“...You’re worried about Yahara, right? You’re looking over at the door because you’re hoping he’ll show up.”

She was half right. But right now, I was hoping for Akiyama to show up even more.

Ahh... I wanna kill someone.

Anyone in the class would probably have heard him say it at least once. But despite their fear of him, most simply wrote it off as edgy nonsense.

But I knew better.

Every time he said it, Masato meant it.

It was a phrase designed to encourage a man who found himself unable to cross that line. Masato, who so disgusted Matsumi-senpai, who put Miki on such guard, was the real deal.

That’s right — I had been able to grasp Masato for quite some time.

Suddenly, the bell rang. But Akiyama's usual command to take our seats wasn't forthcoming.

"Now that you mention it, it doesn't look like the class rep's here today, huh."

I froze at Miki's words, but she was looking at the clock, not at me.

"Welp, I should be heading back now. Let's give it our all today!"

As a result, she didn't notice my change and cheerfully stood up and left.

The other side of my conversation now gone, I closed myself away in my heart. But I myself wasn't there. Inside my heart were other people. Countless other people.

And among them, the one with the largest presence was that man I had been grasping onto.

Although he was grinning, he didn't seem the least bit pleased. The words that sprung forth from that pained smile were much what one would expect.

Ahh... I wanna kill someone.

I hadn't realized it was possible to so anxiously await a homeroom teacher's arrival. Based on his personality, if Akiyama was sick or running late, he would no doubt have contacted the school to inform them. Once the teacher arrived, all of my uneasiness would be put to rest.

But they still weren't here. It had already been ten minutes since the bell had rung.

Time seemed to be violently slowing down, and my heart was beating so loudly I could hear it echo in my ears. As if the second hand was putting on airs, the minutes refused to pass.

Another ten minutes passed, and the teacher still hadn't shown up.

The classes on either side of mine were still raucous. Did that mean that our homeroom teacher wasn't the only one who had yet to show up? Did the staff meeting run over? And if it had, why?

I was so confident in my ill premonition that it gave me chills. Upon holding

my head in my hands, I finally heard footsteps.

The door to the classroom swung open. But the homeroom teacher didn't enter alone. For some reason, the principle was accompanying them.

Both of them wore very intentional grave expressions, almost as if they knew they had to.

"Erm... I have a very serious announcement to make to all of you, so please make sure you remain calm."

The principal began speaking.

"Just now, we received contact from the police... And be assured, we are all just as alarmed as you are..."

I already knew the answer. I knew quite clearly what the principal was about to say. So I couldn't muster up nearly as much shock at the word "homicide" as my classmates did.

Masato Yahara's Closed World (I)

I watched someone get murdered once.

It was back when I was still in kindergarten. Both my parents worked and were away from home a lot, so my grandma usually ended up taking care of me. My parents married late, which meant that my maternal grandma, who was a widower in her seventies, was firmly in the “geezer” camp. Having to take care of me probably put a toll on her.

Despite my parents’ neglect, though, I was a pretty satisfied kid. In retrospect, that was probably thanks to my grandma working her ass off. The two of us were as thick as thieves.

On that day, the two of us were looking after the house as always. I had roped grandma into playing hide-and-seek, forcing her into the role of seeker. Opening a closet’s aged, poorly-fitted door, I found and wedged my five-year-old body into a pile of densely packed futons and muted myself.

Grandma was having a difficult time finding me and was noticeably flustered. Watching her from a crack in the door, I laughed silently to myself.

Suddenly, the front door could be heard opening.

Thinking that perhaps I had run outside, Grandma hurried to the entrance.

Immediately, I heard a scream. And at the same time, an unfamiliar, threatening voice.

At my young age, all I could do at the unsettling atmosphere was tremble anxiously.

I could hear two sets of footsteps drawing near, one belonging to my grandma. Instinctively, I balled myself up among the futons and held my breath. But at the same time I was assailed by a strange sense of duty, as if it were my responsibility to observe what was about to happen.

I could just barely make out my grandma and the man from the cracked door.

“Dammit, the place was s’posed to be empty...! Oy, hurry it up!”

Driven by the man’s angry voice, Grandma opened the chest of drawers. She was likely looking for cash or the bankbook, but as she didn’t know where it was and was panicking, she just opened and closed drawer after drawer. All the while, the man was growing gradually more irritated.

After a little longer of this, Grandma handed the man a stuffed envelope. It was likely filled with cash.

“No hard feels, grams. Just can’t be lettin’ myself get caught. Blame yourself for being home on the wrong day.”

The man took out a sharp object (I think it was a pocketknife or a kitchen knife, but in my panic I didn’t pay much attention to the particulars). In alarm, Grandma screamed something incomprehensible. This earned her even more ire from the man, who pinned her arms behind her back.

Grandma screamed.

“Help me... Maa, help me!”

Although a kindergartener like myself would hardly be able to accomplish anything here, she screamed frantically nonetheless.

But even in the face of my beloved grandma’s bawling, I didn’t leave the closet.

“Maa! Help me! Help me!”

Watching my grandma scream my name over and over, I wanted to remind her, “We’re playing hide-and-seek, so I can’t come out until you find me.”

The blade swung.

A death wail.

A moan.

A weak, self-derisive laugh.

Tears.

A pool of blood.

Until it was all over, I kept perfectly still. I was still playing hide-and seek. I was playing hide-and-seek to this day, unable to return to the real world.

“You’re Masato Yahara, right?”

As I was putting my indoor shoes in the worn-out shoe rack, a girl called my name. I recognized that voice. Having a bad feeling about this, I heaved a sigh.

“...You sure you’ve got the right guy? Kou’s still back in the classroom, right?”

“Please don’t try to blow me off.”

Miki Kouzuki glared at me with trembling fists.

I’d suspected that she had something she wanted to say to me. Without meeting her eyes, I spoke.

“Is this about tryin’ to get me to away from Kou?”

Having the words stolen out of her mouth, Kouzuki knit her eyebrows.

“He doesn’t have shit for magic resistance. If I, a magus unaware of my own powers, am around him I’ll be a bad influence and stain him in my attribute. And that wouldn’t do anyone a lick of good. Something along those lines?”

Kouzuki’s eyes widened in surprise.

What the hell? I thought her value system was gonna be something more interesting, but it ended up being something even I could come up with.

Rapidly losing interest, I set my loafers on the floor.

“So I’m a magus, huh. You’re givin’ me too much credit. Anyways, everyone would just run away from me before I could cast a spell on ‘em anyways.”

“Y...you understand magic?”

“Who knows. I just translated what I was sayin’ into your gibberish.”

“I...if you understand that much, please just stay away from Kouta. You said that everyone just runs away from you, but there’s one exception.”

There was no need to clarify who she was talking about.

“Staying away from him would be for Kouta’s sake. If he keeps being surrounded by my magic, he’ll take on my attribute. He’ll be able to avoid getting stained in a poor attribute like yours or Matsumi-senpai’s.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

I glared at Kouzuki unconsciously. Knowing what kind of person she was only amplified my rage.

“You’re full of yourself. Who the fuck do you think you are, going around babbling about how you’re going to protect Kou or some shit. Did Kou ask for that? He didn’t, did he.”

“...I thought that would be for the best-”

“For the best? Pretty words from everyone’s favorite freakshow. Keep your fucking self-satisfactory bullshit in check, wouldja? Is Kou even the one you’re really tryin’ to protect? ...Heh, you can’t even refute it. What you’re tryin’ to protect by force-staining Kou’s ass...”

I spit it out.

“Is your flimsy-ass, brittle little closed world.”

It seemed that her self awareness didn’t extend that far. Her face went white at my words.

I drew close to Kouzuki, who was slowly shrinking away from me, and lifted her up by the collar of her uniform.

“But by talkin’ to you like this, I realized that something I don’t need to worry about. You just aren’t worth my time.”

Fear appeared for the first time on Kouzuki’s face. ...Nah, that ain’t it. Since the moment she called out to me, her fists had been trembling from how hard she had tried to hide her fear. That’s how powerless a person she was.

“He’ll just come to hold you in contempt, and that’ll be that. Later.”

I didn’t want to so much as look at her any more. Releasing her collar, I walked away from the shoe rack without sparing her a second glance.

With all the rumors swirling around her, I figured she’d have a little more of a

backbone in her. But she was just another person with no faith in their own damn world. She just wanted Kou in order to reinforce her world.

She was just like all the others. She gave off the sound of chains.

Her chains were quieter than others, maybe, but that was all there was to it. She was just another nobody, far removed from the ideal I strived for.

She was just as much a nobody as I was.

Chains.

I started seeing the chains when I was in ninth grade.

In contrast to my peers, who were grappling with entrance exams and relationship woes, I could feel myself growing distant.

The contents of their worries even drove some of them to cut their own wrists, but I couldn't see it as any more serious than whether a sand castle was knocked over or not. After all, even if they wounded themselves they didn't plan on dying. I — I, who truly knew death — could tell that those wounds were nothing more than a tool to highlight the extent of their woes.

Once I became a complete bystander, simply gazing on them in observation, I noticed something.

Everything they held dear was created.

With so much information flowing down the muddy stream of our world, a simple papier-mâché construction is enough for them all to implicitly believe it.

They were being controlled.

Made to dance in perfect harmony, they were being controlled by fiendish, brutal chains.

Then, I became able to see those chains. And from the materialized chains, I could even hear noise. The rattling noise they made was raucous. The noise was so raucous it sapped all vitality from me. Once that was finished, I began losing my ideals as well. Lost in the pursuit of cheap pleasure, I no longer cared if the world was in color or monochrome, or if it was real or simply the inside of an image. To that end, I engaged in a string of unethical activities. Pleasure was all that was real to me, but it was merely ephemeral, and in the end time simply

passed while nothing else changed. My world was peeled apart by the chains. It was a simple, complete excoriation.

When I finally managed to regain a grip on my peeled-up world, a thought suddenly floated to my mind, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I wanna kill someone.

Murder had taken the color from my world and reduced my reality to the state it was in today. Ironically, as a consequence of its gravity, it was also what lay just beyond my outstretched hand. No matter where I reached out towards, I would run into those homicidal urges. Like a butterfly trapped in a spiderweb, no matter how much I struggled I couldn't move. From where I was, I couldn't see anything else.

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

Wanting to flee from the chains and the noise, I reached out my hand. This time, my hand got caught on those homicidal urges. They began controlling me.

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

But even then, I would never have believed it.

That there could be a person unfettered by those chains.

“Kusukusu... you two really are interesting, aren't you?”

I could tell that the girl, who had a childish face and and looked somewhat off-balance, was different from the moment she started speaking to us.

Her smile seemed like it was free of any influence from the events of the outside world.

“Whaddya want?”

Who was she? Like Kouzuki, was she trying to take advantage of how fragile Kou's chains were?

“Oh, Ririko was just thinking how she wanted to become good friends with

Hiragi!”

She didn’t react even a little to my display of animosity. And she didn’t give the sense that she was playing dumb. Humans are creatures bound by fear. Anyone would react to the presence of violence.

Then what was wrong with her?

It seemed that “different” didn’t cut it. She was clearly lacking something fundamental.

“What’s so interesting about you two are the call signs you’re giving off.”

She spoke as if her peculiar words were commonplace. That was something neither I nor Kouzuki was capable of. This girl didn’t desire salvation, and she had no doubts in her own world. In actuality, she was basically rejecting interaction with the rest of mankind.

Inside a closed world that was like a perfectly sealed-off room, she had no need to grow.

I’d heard rumors about this. Rumors about an upperclassman who had been coming and going from a psychiatric hospital since she enrolled.

“Hey, are you that Ririko Matsumi chick?”

“Oh, yes. Ririko is Ririko, of course.”

According to the rumors, she lacked boundaries. Unable to tell where her “self” began and ended, she supposedly saw everything outside her body as simply parts of herself. She was under the misapprehension that not just her body but everything she could more or less freely manipulate was part of her. Although it was a bit more allegorical in my case, I’d certainly had times where I felt unable to put down my phone, as if it were a part of my body. But as far as she was concerned, her unification with her electrical devices was no allegory. To her, using electrical signals from her brain to move her limbs wasn’t just the same as using a remote to change the channel on TV, the remote and the television themselves were just parts of her body.

It was a world beyond comprehension. But regardless, it was the world she lived in.

A different world from the rest of us.

“Interesting, aren’t they? White and ultramarine, huh. Aren’t most people orange? But you two are different. Ririko likes white, you know. Makes me want to do something.”

I had no idea what those colors meant in her code. All I could tell was that they were code for something else.

I glanced at Kou. Even though he’s confused, he wouldn’t reject another, even if that person is Matsumi. But even Kou likely won’t be able to grasp her world.

...Actually, is that really true? This is the same Kou who’s spent a whole month getting to know me, after all.

“Hey, hey, can Ririko read you?”

“Read me?”

“Oh, that’s right. Most people can’t do scanning. But, but, you see, Ririko can do scanning!”

Maybe Matsumi, who blurs the boundaries between electrical devices and her own body, is deluded into thinking she can fulfil the role of an electrical device herself?

But something quickly makes me realize that that perception was halfhearted.

“Beep bibibi, bip bip bibeep.”

It’s not a delusion. It’s something far worse. In that instant, Matsumi became an electrical device.

That’s right. Why didn’t I notice it sooner?

This chick doesn’t have any chains at all.

The moment I realized that, it felt as if the false machine noise was causing the world to violently lurch. I couldn’t keep my footing. The world was slanting simply because I had become aware of my own change. Unable to remain in place, I began tumbling. I was rolling. Rolling and rolling. Rolling and rolling and rolling and rolling.

How did this happen?

...Ah, because I didn't believe. I didn't believe that a person without chains could even exist. That's why my world was doing an about-face.

"Beep bibibi, bip bip bibeep."

The sun went out. What illuminated my world in its place was Matsumi's eyeball. Within those dead-fish eyes, her pupil was focusing like the lens of a single-lens reflex camera. Taking on heat, her eyes began to sear me. It burns! It burns! It burns!

Beep bibibi, bip bip bibeep.

The noise pursued me and, as I spun through space, bored its way into my body. From near and from far, the noise continued to ring. I had long since lost track of where it was ringing from. I was becoming to create the noise as well.

The lens was simply floating in space.

Those eyes turned towards me.

"Ah—"

What part of me were they looking at?

They were looking at me burning and tumbling through space. I'm begging you, don't expose this hackneyed end of mine. Those pitiful limitations of mine. Those banal thoughts of mine.

"...don't."

I didn't want to know.

"Beep bi—"

I didn't want to know. I didn't want to know. I didn't want to know.

"DON'T!"

As I scream, the floating eyeball lens vanishes. In that moment, I'm assailed with vertigo and the world goes black. Once the light returned, I could see Kou looking concerned and Matsumi pouting.

"You don't have to shout like that, you know..."

"Excuse me, Matsumi-senpai, what was that just now...?"

“Hold on, hold on. Ririko’s going to put it into words now.”

Matsumi stopped being human again.

She somehow got information about Kou, and she’s translating it such that we can understand it as well. A computer turning binary into letters and images.

“Unconsciously rejects his mother due to her hysterical temperament. Receives mixed messages from his father. Neither parent approaches parenting with any degree of consistency. His sister enjoys killing cats. Has been ordered by his family to deal with the cat corpses. Will listen to anything he is told. Susceptible to brainwashing. Versatile. Abnormally good at understanding the value systems of others. Has no self, so regards others with-”

“Th... that’s enough! Matsumi-senpai, please cut it out!”

She returns to being human.

“So? So? How was that? How’d you like my scanning? Did Ririko get that all right?”

“Senpai, can we go now?”

“Whaat? But Ririko wanted to chat more! He’s white, after all! He’s the only one!”

“Sorry, but we got places to be.”

“Ririko understands... Well, Ririko guesses it can’t be helped then. Ririko guesses she’ll see you later then, Tanihara.”

Not thinking, I stopped in my tracks.

People read my last name, “谷原,” incorrectly all the time. So the mistake itself wasn’t particularly notable.

“Huh? Aren’t you Tanihara?”

“It’s read ‘Yahara’, Senpai.”

So in other words, that’s what that meant.

Matsumi’s “scanning” gathers information visually.

We strolled through an abandoned shopping district, shuttered up as a result of its inability to compete with a large nearby shopping mall.

I gazed at Kou in silent shock.

Even when faced with Ririko Matsumi, he didn't give up on trying to comprehend her. If we hadn't gotten lucky, he would have completely taken her in.

It would be fine if he got invaded by Kouzuki. He'd be treated as a freak, sure, but at least he'd be able to keep on living. But Matsumi was no good. If he took in something broken, he'd become broken as well. It would be like downloading a malicious app.

"Get this through your head. Don't talk to that birdbrain again. She'll be a bad influence on you. Got it?"

Kou nodded. But it wasn't because he was convinced, it was because he felt the situation called for it.

I didn't what his true intentions were. ...Hell, I didn't know if he had any intentions in the first place.

"Masato, did you understand what was going on with that scanning thing?"

Scanning.

Based on the fact that she got the information visually, I had a hunch as to what the trick was. But it was tough to put into words.

I suspected the reason she was able to guess my name was because she subconsciously knew it already. Even though the time she spent in the hospital kept her from showing up at school much, she was still a fellow student of ours. There was plenty of times she could have run across our names.

The only abnormal part was how she went about recalling that information.

Normal people quickly forget information they don't need. For example, we don't remember the faces of every person we pass on the street.

But what if this "scanning" let her pull out memories from deep in her brain, memories that anyone else would have lost? If that were the case, then simply having passed us in a hallway would be plenty for her to know our names.

It then followed that her being able to put names to faces, as well as dredge up all that information about Kou, was simply the result of outstanding insight born from her recollection, observational, and analytic prowess. Of course, she couldn't do that all the time, but only when she was in a trance state from putting herself under the self-hypnosis called "scanning."

Seen from the outside, a skilled fortune-teller would appear to be able to trace the steps of another's life. Hell, even I'd be able to guess whether someone's a virgin or not a good chunk of the time. But Matsumi was on another level. She was able to come up with his personality, his familial structure, and even where he lived. It was practically a superpower.

It was abnormal.

If I told Kou all this, nothing good would come of it. It would just end up driving him towards taking her in.

"... not even a little."

So I dodged the question.

Even if Kou didn't believe me, he neither pressed me nor showed signs of dissatisfaction. Ahh, now that I think about it, there's something wrong with this guy too.

The light in front of us turned red and we reflexively stopped.

"Why the hell'd we stop?"

"The light was red, wasn't it?"

"There ain't any cars here."

Ahh, I can hear it. I can hear that noise again.

Just beyond my field of view lay those chains. Beautiful chains that acted as if they owned us, designed to stop us from moving.

I couldn't help but despise the chains. They bound me and were the cause of everything that drained color from my world.

...or so I thought.

And because that's what I thought, I yearned to be a person without chains. I

truly thought I desired release from those chains.

But then I met such an unfettered person.

And what did I feel, upon gazing at that person?

Fear.

I was scared of that person without chains. I felt fright. A feeling that implied unimaginable distance.

There was no chance I could become a person without chains.

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

As if flaunting themselves, the chains' noise echoed.

You will never be released.

Shut up.

You will be bound until the day you die.

Shut up!

But you already knew that, right? The reason these chains will never be torn off is because you yourself have no desire to tear them off.

I SAID SHUT UP!

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

The noise keeps resounding.

The sound of chains. The sound of common sense. The sound of morals.

And the sound of my desire to kill.

[illegible]

“Ahh... I wanna kill someone.”

After parting ways with Kou, I was unable to muster the urge to return home and inside took the train into the suburbs. While the area around the station was prosperous in comparison to the shutter town I had just left, the dust and general atmosphere made it clear that it was past its prime.

I wandered about aimlessly. A department store that would likely be demolished in a few years. A old-fashioned movie theater that looked wholly unfit to bring a date to. A bookstore that had been repurposed into a shop for otaku goods. The town, which was connected, bound, and encircled by power lines, stunk of sewage. If you boiled down all the mud, the sludge, and the coal tar, it seemed like it like it would make for delicious, piping hot ramen broth.

I sat on a bench in front of the station and observed the passersby. The people waiting by the station were like marionettes, each and every one of them glued to their smartphones. Social networks, forcing them into round-the-clock surface-level pleasantries. Aggregation sites pushing morals upon them that are neither right nor wrong. Blogs flooding with comments, not from individuals but from their very souls. All an horrifying gambit to strengthen the chains. A colossal trap.

The definition of people who would be better off dead.

Let's suppose that that definition was “people who are detrimental to society.” If that's the case, people who killed innocents would be better off dead. People whose contributions to society were outweighed by the harm they cause to others would be better off dead too. People whose deaths would be rejoiced at rather than wept at and people who inspire anarchic thoughts, those people would obviously be better off dead. Wouldn't the world be a better place if we just rounded up all those brutes and left only the good people?

...It probably would. With fewer recessive genes around, of course humanity's going to be wiser. If, hypothetically, the world was in peril and we had to trim the population, you can bet your ass that the morals around protecting the

weak and disadvantaged are going to be the first to go and there'd be large-scale massacres. ...Well, it doesn't have to be something as over-the-top as that. All I'm trying to get at is that there's plenty of people who could die and no one would mind.

"Yo."

I call out to a passing woman in an immaculately-pressed suit, likely on her way home from the office.

In that instant, I got the impression that although she works hard and contributes to society, she frequently tramples on the feelings of others. Huh, maybe I'm awakening intuitive powers like Matsumi's? Or maybe it was just a delusion of mine? I don't much care either way. As far as I cared, she was a detriment to society - someone who was better off dead.

"Are you speaking to me?"

"Yeah, anyone's fine. There's plenty of ya around. Now, a riddle. When's a door not a door?"

"When it's ajar... Excuse me, what did you want?"

"Who ordered you?"

"Huh?"

"Who ordered you to say 'when it's ajar'?"

The woman stopped in her tracks, fear spreading across her face.

"Nobody ordered me to do anything... what's going on..."

"That's right! No one ordered you to do shit, right? Then why does everyone answer the same fucking way? There's gotta be plenty of other reasons why a door wouldn't a door, right? Then why's it gotta be ajar and not a dormant volcano or somethin'?^[5]"

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

Ah, shut up. This chick's chains were particularly noisy. Women tended to have grimmer, sturdier chains than men.

"You're pissing me off. You want me to fucking kill you?"

“Wh...what are you talking about? Is there something wrong with you?”

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

“Get outta my sight. If you don’t, I’m gonna fucking kill you.”

Not bothering to hide her repugnance, she quickly ran off.

Heh. Once I considered what I just did objectively, I give a strained laugh.

It would seem I’d developed a bug.

Walking around is too much of a pain. After clenching my teeth and somehow dragging myself to a nearby park, I layed down on a bench. Overheating to an unbearable degree, my brain forcibly entered a shutdown state. My consciousness faded away dreamlessly.

I opened my eyes.

The blue sky flooded into them.

I couldn’t form thoughts. The sun’s blinding light assaulted my eyes, and the painful stimulus gradually restored my consciousness.

My back flared up in pain, and I remembered that I had been sleeping in a park. I reached for a cigarette, but found to my dismay that my pack was empty. What a fucking joke.

I clutched my head, slowly recalling the events of yesterday.

There’s something wrong with me.

I was aware of how desperate I was getting, but I was able to keep a cool head for now.

But it seemed unlikely that I would be able to fully get back to normal. Upon learning of the existence of a human without chains, I stopped be able to brush away my homicidal urges, which were now simmering to the point of boiling over. I could go mad at any moment. There was even a part of me that wanted to go mad, knowing that there was a chance that doing so might grant me the impetus to commit murder. From that small reason alone, I knew I was past the

point of being able to contain these urges. It was past the level of sexual desire, and was more akin to a hunger that scalded my throat. There was no chance the urges would subside.

I would either kill or go mad.

It could only be one or the other.

I decided to return home briefly. I had no idea what my parents would say at this point, but if I didn't they were liable to file a missing person report out of obligation and a desire to leave a paper trail. And I was out of money. I knew of a method to solve both those problems at once. A method I had used often since middle school.

Kicking aside an empty can as I entered the house, I noted that my parents weren't home. After fishing through the shelf where grandma pulled the envelope from before she died, I slipped two ten-thousand yen^[6] bills into my wallet.

But where should I go? I had no destination in mind. But in this state, I couldn't stay at home, nor could I go to school.

For a moment, I briefly contemplated going to school. Thanks to my reputation, at least all the jackasses I wanted to avoid would stay away from me.

And Kou was there.

Kouta Hiiragi. A man with no firm sense of self. Generally, people analyze what kind of person they themselves are and form a sense of self around that. In a certain sense they label themselves.

But Kou doesn't. As a result, his self doesn't settle into any one shape. I dunno what made him like that, but based on Matsumi's scanning the cause probably lies with his family circumstances.

Because his self isn't set, Kou tends to take on whatever form his partner wants him to. Every time he interacts with someone, his personality changes little by little. As a result, he's become able to truly understand others, and not

just on a superficial level. He'll probably grow accustomed to Kouzuki's magic in no time, and he fully understands my madness as well. He doesn't resist it, either. That's why if he's careless, he'll end up understanding Matsumi as well and taking her in.

That reminds me, Matsumi likened Kou's color to "white." I get it, that kinda makes sense. Kou can take on any other color. That in and of itself is dangerous. That's why Kouzuki is being all meddlesome and trying to stain Kou in her color; she's trying to prevent him from getting stained in a malicious color like mine.

Being accepted by others feels good. I learned that for the first time when I met Kou.

Kouzuki's probably the same. That's why she's trying to keep him for herself.

I guess I can't go to school after all.

It's dangerous for me because Kou is there.

Kou is the ultimate sympathizer. He would no doubt accept even me, who's enveloped in homicidal urges. Upon being accepted by him, I would stop perceiving myself as abnormal, lose my last bits of resistance, and eventually take action. I could picture it easily.

I grabbed a pack of cigarettes from my room and lit one with a shaking hand. The nicotine settled me down a bit, but the urges were unabated.

I slipped a butterfly knife into my pocket as a de facto tranquilizer. I could kill at any time. I could make that call whenever I wanted. Knowing that somehow helped me preserve my sense of reason up until now. But that bit just now was simply meaningless. It simply served to rile me up.

A paper-thin line was all that kept me from using this knife up till now. But that paper-thin line held within it a world of difference.

But I knew.

As I was now, I was liable to cross that line.

When I came to my senses - when I truly came to my senses - it was already night.

Once again I found myself wandering through that deteriorating suburb.

While I knew little about killing time, I knew quite a bit about killing. All I had to do was noncommittally indulge myself. My mind simply sought pleasure without applying any deeper meaning to anything. In other words, I was deteriorating as a human. I was an animal with intelligence but no use for it. There are a surprising number of humans who fit that description, so I didn't lack for companions. Hip! Hip! Hoorah! Other people were necessary for the pursuit of pleasure. Transient relationships were best. Human garbage was best. If they were men, though, they'd sooner or later commit some kind of sexual assault, so I tried to avoid that. I wasn't into fucking chicks while they screamed, and taking risks for something I wasn't into was right off the table.

So I looked for women. Chicks who were into give-and-take relationships. Animals who sought only pleasure like I did. Some of them got clingy, but their kind feared rejection, so once dealt with none of them pressed the issue. Once they got hooked on drugs and drowned in pleasure, any chick would become almost disgustingly docile. Once I was done with with them, they would without fail use every word and action at their disposal to wail about how lonely they were or some shit, but I couldn't give less of a fuck about their pitiful emotions.

"You're pretty good."

One of those women spoke up to me when I was playing darts at an amusement center. What was her name again? I think she told me, but I forgot.

"Do you play darts a lot?"

"Somethin' like that."

Through this meaningless conversation, I got authorization to step into her territory. It was obnoxious, but a necessary ritual nonetheless.

The chick wasn't a so-called "gyaru^[7]". She was no beauty, but her face was attractive enough to put her on the receiving end of gossip. She wore a cheap-looking black dress with hideous pink frills. I could tell from experience that she was available.

The ritual had gone on plenty long enough to move to the next step.

"Anywhere you wanna head after this?"

“Nah, not really, I guess.”

“Follow me, then.”

Although she no doubt knew what was to follow, she simply followed me without putting up any opposition.

Where should we do it? The park? Nah, my back hurts, so a cheap hotel would be better... Such thoughts filled my head as we boarded the elevator.

Leaving the building, we neared a tunnel running underneath the railway. Right as I put my hand on her back as a lip service, I heard an unexpected voice.

“Is that you, Yahara?”

There stood the class representative, carrying a plastic folder and clearly on his way home from cram school — Shuuichi Akiyama.

I was planning on feigning not being able to hear him due to the train passing, but when I reflexively looked over my shoulder, our eyes met.

“What do you intend to accomplish by not coming to school. Your friends are worried about you, you know.”

His words were exemplary yet insincere. It was almost as if someone was making him say them. First of all, did this guy even think I even *had* friends?

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

Oh, shut up already.

For some reason or another, my earlier hedonism had been enough to temporarily silence the chains. But in the face of this man, that was impossible.

His chains were grotesque, grimmer and sturdier than any other’s.

Feeling an onset of vertigo, I plunged my hand into my pocket and grasped my knife, my de facto tranquilizer.

“What will come of you continuing to neglect school? You will simply idle away your days. If you fail to put in the effort now, many paths will become closed to you, and you will regret it fiercely. Even you should realize such a simple thing.”

“The fuck are you going on about? Don’t go judging everything according your

values.”

“I believe my values are extremely commonplace values.”

“Don’t I fucking know it.”

And that’s the thing I hate more than anything else.

“You know it, yet you rebel against it. Don’t you think you’re acting a little childish?”

Akiyama pushed up the bridge of his glasses.

Maybe what he’s correcting with his glasses isn’t his eyesight, but him himself? He was extreme enough to harbor such delusions. He could only see the corrected, beautiful world. Unimportant things didn’t even enter his view. It’s like he’s forgotten that when he takes off his glasses, the blurry, hard-to-grasp world in front of him is the real one.

Akiyama’s gaze shifted from me to the girl. Faced with the honor student Akiyama’s reproachful gaze, she uncomfortably lifted the corners of her mouth.

“Your girlfriend? Won’t you be imposing on her, dragging her around at this hour?”

He spoke unaffectedly. He likely doubted that there was any woman who would willingly spend time around me.

“She ain’t my girlfriend, though.”

“She isn’t?”

“Just some chick I picked up off the street. We were thinking of going and fucking. Get it?”

“Excuse me?”

At his confusion, the girl gave an embarrassed smile. Of course he’s not going to be able simply nod and accept something like that.

Glancing sidelong at Akiyama, I give a snicker.

Hey, look, he can’t even hide it. Inside that disgust-filled expression, he’s jealous that I’m getting laid. That fucker’s so fastidious he probably wouldn’t admit he even had desires like that.

“You... have quite some nerve, saying such immoral things so brazenly.”

“Jealous?”

“I’m well aware of how proud of your faults you are. May I ask you a question, though? How often do you do things like this?”

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

Oh, this isn’t good. Shut up. This guy’s chains just won’t shut up.

“All the fucking time, man. What, you want to get in on this shit? I can teach you how to. It’s easy, all you gotta do is lie about your age to register for dating sites. Studying ain’t good for shit, you feel me? You know, if we all just gave in to our primal desire for pleasure, we could all just live as happy-ass animals.”

Akiyama just glared at me silently.

“...Um, I just remember something I have to do, so I’m going to head home, okay?”

“Yeah.”

The girl had lost interest. I still couldn’t remember her name as I watched her run off.

Akiyama watched her recede far longer than I did.

“Yahara.”

Akiyama spoke, gazing off into the distance.

“What?”

“I believe it is unwise to indiscreetly give voice to the thoughts of others. But I see you and I do not share that opinion.”

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

That noise was whispering to me.

Kill.

Kill. Kill. Kill.

It’s time for you to join the world of killers. That’s the only path left available to you.

Despite being more tightly bound by those unholy chains than any other, Shuuichi Akiyama was enough of a freak to feel not agony but comfort from their embrace. There was no human who symbolized the chains as much as he did. That would make him the ideal sacrifice, no?

“You wanna sermonize? Fine by me. In any case, let’s head somewhere less crowded.”

“I see; very well. I would rather nobody else carelessly inserted their voice in our conversation, after all.”

“Yeah, right. Wouldn’t want anyone getting in the way.”

I didn’t want anyone to get in the way.

Not until it was all over.

Unlike a large city like Tokyo, all you had to do in the suburb was walk a little and the tall buildings would be replaced by rice paddies and vacant lots. Past a convenience store with a sprawling parking lot belying its defunct state lay a similarly-defunct factory. I neither knew nor cared what the factory had originally produced, but the sensation of being underground brought about by its oily, metallic odors made it ideal. I didn’t know what this iron press was designed for either, but when I laid my hand on it it was icy-cold to the touch.

“I’m surprised that you knew about a place like this.”

“I told you about all the chicks I was forcin’ myself on, right? You gotta know about places like this to do shit like that.”

Akiyama scowled in repugnance.

Honestly, I’m surprised he’d follow me to a sketchy-ass place like this so easily. Could he not even begin to imagine himself being in danger? ...Well, he probably couldn’t. That was the kind of victim I was dealing with here. The kind of guy who was filled with baseless conviction that he couldn’t possibly get involved with the kind of incident you see on the news.

He was one of them. Hell, he’d probably even be shocked at the sight of one of his classmates smoking.

“So? I’m ready to be preached at.”

“Before we start, would you mind turning on a light? It’s too dark for me to even make out your face. I feel that that would somewhat defeat the purpose of this conversation.”

Did he really think that being able to see my face would make his shitty-ass sermon stick?

“I think someone left a lantern here...”

Squinting to look for the electric lantern, I found it beside a pile of cigarette butts. As I flicked the switch, Akiyama’s form came dimly into view.

“For you to have lead me this far, I can assume you have at least some intention of hearing me out?”

I choked back laughter. Akiyama didn’t seem to consider for a moment the possibility that he might be assaulted, let alone killed.

I’m sure what’s floating through his mind is something along the lines of a naive-ass after school special. The pitiable delinquent, coming from a bad background, finally finds someone who understands him and, struck by his sincere actions, gets back on the straight and narrow.

What a nice story. Even I, without an ounce of cynicism, think it would be nice if we had more of that kind of story. I’ve seen a lot of delinquents, and most of them are scum through and through. Defective from their very genes. Deficient in brains, empathy, fear, and imagination, the lot of them.

But in spite of all that, this guy has enough faith in his persuasive abilities to follow me all this way. I half wanted to see what the it was about his speech he was so confident in. Hell, maybe they’d even be enough to convert me.

“Let me start by asking you something. Are you happy with the way you’re living right now?”

“As if. I’m always wishing I could change, you know?”

Even right now.

In any case, I was about to be able to change. Not that I had any idea what I was going to change into.

“Then why not simply be more diligent? From what I can see, you certainly aren’t stupid. I mean that, by the way. All it takes for people to change is to find an objective and to put in the effort necessary to achieve it. At the moment you’re lapsing into depravity, but if you take a slightly longer view I have no doubt you can overcome such temptations.”

I laugh inappropriately upon hearing that from the most nearsighted man imaginable.

“So you’re saying if I just become a straight-A student like you, my life’ll open up and become all peaches and fuckin’ cream?”

“It doesn’t necessarily have to be studies. Anything you find that you can put your all into works. And that’s all it takes to open up your life. I’m sure there’s some activity you could find yourself getting engrossed in.”

“There’s nothin’ like that.”

“Are you certain? What about sports, say, boxing or rugby?”

I wanted to throw up. Is this guy actually referencing old after school specials, then lumping all delinquents together in one convenient little category? Faced with such a blatant lack of imagination, I began to doubt if he was even truly a straight-A student.

“And if you do indeed find something you want to do, the more paths you have available before you to choose from the better. As you are right now, paths are vanishing.”

“Dumbass. No one who was willing to work their ass off just to keep future possibilities open would be in this situation in the first damn place.”

“You mustn’t give up on yourself. Envision the future, and stride towards it!”

I hadn’t suspected his little sermon would fail to resonate with me to this extent. The things he was saying were ostensibly correct. Perhaps they would have resonated more from a different mouth.

But the words felt like they had no weight behind them. They held none of the speaker’s true feelings. It felt like he was simply reading out of some manual on delinquent correction. The words were completely those of another.

And on top of that, the sound of chains.

His thoughts and mine were in parallel, destined to never intersect.

“Those chains of yours. I’ll pass on being bound by them, thank you very much!”

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

Ahh, I can’t hold it in any more.

I should just kill him. I can’t bear to listen to any more of this. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. When I open up his flesh, my future will open up as well. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. I don’t want to be here any more. I’m never coming back here again. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. This place is empty; no one will hear him scream. His death wails will be a hymnal for me alone, a noise sufficient to drown out those chains. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. His blood will go flying. I don’t know how my world will change. But if nothing else, my monochrome world will be dyed red. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. I should just kill him. I should just kill him.

“Chains? I’m not sure I see any chains to speak of... What are you talking about, Yahara?”

Looking around, he frowned.

“I’ll tell you, so you can die in peace.”

“...Yahara?”

“Chains. The preconceived notions that bind us. That’s a useless definition. They’re essentially rules without order. Morals, forced upon us. Their noise is annoying. I’ve always wanted to escape them. The only way I can escape them is by killing. In other words, that noise is basically the sound of my desire to kill.”

I pulled the butterfly knife out of my pocket. With a flick of my wrist, the

blade flies out.

“Now I can get out of here!”

My reluctance to kill vanished.

Immediately, my hand was filled with the sensation of flesh. It was softer than I expected, barely giving me the sensation I had slashed at all. The experience was lacking.

“Now you can get out of here, hm...”

The red blood dripped loudly.

Now that I think about it, it’s strange. Even though we constantly have blood flowing through our bodies, we only ever think about it at times like this. It’s like not being able to see the forest for the trees. It’s not that our awareness is limited, we’re simply under the impression that it is.

“—On that point alone, we are of the same opinion.”

What sentiment did that smile carry? It seemed similar to the sense of accomplishment a child would display upon digging up an anthill and earnestly squishing its inhabitants.

“Your life has no value... or rather, you’re like a vermin that deserves to die.”

Akiyama spoke bluntly, his voice carrying no inflection.

He pulled out the knife.

As he pulled it out, blood — lifeblood — poured from *my chest*.

Releasing my wrist, Akiyama pulled the knife out from my chest and tossed it aside. Fluids burst out like a stopped had been uncorked. Red liquid spilled out from my mouth. No matter what it was I was regurgitating, it wasn’t anything good.

“You thought too little of me. Did you really believe that I had no idea why you brought me here?”

I knew it. Akiyama was a deviant.

“You should have realized it as soon as I had you turn the lantern on. I had you light it so I could make out your movements.”

Everyone likely, to varying extents, realizes that they're bound by something. Even if you couldn't see the chains, you could definitely feel them choking you.

But Akiyama was completely unlike that. He had no doubts in his own world. He never doubted that what he saw as just was what the rest of the world also saw as just.

Akiyama was too much of an honors student for his own good, and as a result had never been reproached or criticized by the adults in his life. *So he was under the misapprehension that everything he did was just.*

That was his abnormality.

"I was well aware of your murderous aspirations. And from our discussion, I could tell that those aspirations were not something you were capable of escaping from. That is why I judged it necessary to eliminate you."

The thoughts Akiyama held were widely held by society to be just. But nobody's cogs are aligned perfectly. Perhaps the misalignment was small at first. Something another could easily notice and alert him to. But because of how much of an honors student he was, he had nobody to point it out to him. So that continued twisting into the form Akiyama desired. And though the misalignment had grown to lethal proportions, even if someone were to point it out Akiyama was past the point of heeding the words of others.

Vainglory. There was no man alive better suited to that word than Akiyama. I should have recognized that.

"You said something about helping me dying in peace, if I recall? It would appear I am now in a position to offer parting words to you."

Looking down on my fallen body, Akiyama dug his heel into my face.

"I offer you this explanation so that you can die in peace. Would your world change if you killed someone? I offer you the answer you sought for so long."

My vision went dark, gradually fading. My sense of pain left me as well, the only thing I could feel any more being a cold sense of emptiness where the knife had stabbed me.

"The answer: it would not. Or perhaps it would? You weren't a very good

point of reference, after all. After all, you're simply vermin. What emotion stirs within you when you kill a cockroach? I'm sure you feel the same thing anyone does. Nothing but disgust."

The noise of the world started fading as well. Great, now I didn't have to listen to Akiyama babble any more.

I fell into the void.

Everything disappeared.

All that was left were my thoughts.

For argument's sake.

For argument's sake, if I had successfully killed Akiyama, would my world have changed?

Ahh, I came close enough to tell. I can picture it as if it were real. Even if I had successfully killed Akiyama,

My world wouldn't have changed.

It wouldn't have changed a bit.

There would simply have been a corpse rolling around in front of me. And having lost my last thread of salvation, I would have gone mad.

Thinking about it, such a conclusion wouldn't have been half bad.

But even so, I thought.

If by some miracle I survive this, I would still try to kill Akiyama. I would definitely kill him.

Not to change my world.

Not to erase the sound of chains.

I would kill him because he pisses me off. I would kill him out of simple hatred.

I would be the most hackneyed, worthless killer imaginable.

Indeed.

I am, to a degree that disappoints even me, an unremarkable person.

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

I can hear them. I can hear them in my ears, which should no longer be able to hear at all.

I knew. In truth, I've known for a long time. The cacophonous ringing was never the sound of other people's chains. It was—

—the sound of the chains that had always been wrapped around me.

Miki Kouzuki's Closed World (I)

I was talking to Kouta, who was occasionally staring off into the distance, amidst the hustle and bustle of the pre-homeroom classroom.

It was June 19th. Two weeks had passed since Masato Yahara's body had been found.

The murder, king of all scandals, sent ripples throughout the school. But contrary to my expectations, the ripples faded within a week. The reason was that Yahara had always been something of an untouchable delinquent, avoided by his schoolmates due to being perceived as an abnormal individual. Thus the event was simply perceived as an "abnormal individual" becoming involved in "abnormal incident," allowing interest in the entire affair to quickly fade. It was like a gangster getting killed; insufficient to pique the interest of the public.

The school had already returned to its daily routine, everything working normally.

But there was one exception.

The fact that that exception was Kouta went without saying.

Kouta, Yahara's sole friend, was dragging out his death.

"Looks like they still haven't caught the killer, huh."

It would be too sad for Kouta if he didn't feel that I least I felt sentimental towards Yahara's death.

"Yeah. They still haven't been caught."

But given Kouta's abilities, he likely realized that my sentimentality was simply a pretense. But he nodded all the same.

...To be quite honest, I couldn't muster any sadness at Yahara's death. Although I felt pity for him, that was the extent of it. And I suspected most others would feel much the same way I did. Even his parents didn't look particularly sad. To the contrary, they seemed rather glad that a nuisance had

disappeared from their lives. Every way you looked, people were simply feigning sadness, and most were doing a dozen times worse of a job than I was.

It seemed this fact came as a shock to Kouta. He was trying not to let it show, but... actually, knowing Kouta, he may not have realized it himself.

“Kouta...”

“...hm?”

Even his responses were delayed. He had been like this a lot recently.

“Well, if you’re able to... I’d like you to try to stop thinking about Yahara.

“Why?”

“It might be dangerous.”

Kouta’s eyes widened in puzzlement.

I wasn’t confident. But it looked to me like Kouta’s state was changing by moment to moment. And Yahara was no doubt the cause of that.

The dead can’t use magic.

But a person’s magic is most powerful in the moments before their death. In order to leave behind traces of themselves within another, they can use “agglutination” magic. People put down their defenses when faced with the dying. No matter how much of a sinner that person was, people inevitably forgive them, stop resisting them, and accept their influence. Depending on who their partner is, the living may even unconditionally take on the will of the dead and agglutinate. It’s not dissimilar to succeeding the will of the departed.

And Yahara clearly left something in Kouta. If Kouta were a normal person, even if he agglutinated he would only extract the parts that were useful to him, so he himself wouldn’t change. But this was Kouta we were talking about. The pinnacle of indifference, not only would he not notice changes within himself, he wouldn’t even care whether they were for good or for evil.

So if he kept thinking about Yahara, he was in danger of agglutinating.

He was showing symptoms already.

“Recently, my magic hasn’t been as potent.”

Kouta wasn't supposed to have an attribute, but he was beginning to take someone else's on. He was drifting away from mine. As for whose attribute he was taking on, it should go without saying — Masato Yahara's. If things continued on this way, at worst Kouta might end up becoming a powerful, evil magus like Yahara was.

"Everyone, note that the bell has rung. I would appreciate it if you took your seats."

At the same time as the bell rang, their class representative's voice called out. Their class's distinctive routine.

Thinking it rather unpleasant as I looked at said representative, I somehow felt a sense of displeasure from him when our eyes crossed. Was he trying to tell me to get out of his classroom?

"...I have to get going. Let's give it our best this week, okay?"

"Yeah."

On account of Yahara's incident, we had postponed his home visit until this week. I had until then to think of a way to resolve this situation. I shouldn't be in so much of a hurry. My foe was powerful, but he was also dead. Even if this situation continued, my foe couldn't draw any more magic.

"See you later, then. Bye bye!"

Although my hand was trembling, I smiled as sweetly as possible. A smile has the power to forcibly bind a person. That's why I made sure to never forget to smile.

My bedroom. It was both my territory and within a boundary. It was the place where my magic was amplified the most. In there, there should be no shortage of ways to dispel Yahara's magic.

After I returned to my classroom, I scowled as if I were glaring at a blackboard and thought about Kouta.

I had to reanalyze the individual named Kouta Hiiragi.

Kouta had low magic resistance. He took magic magic in without resisting in.

The reason for that lay in his efforts to avoid possessing an attribute of his own. His entire life was makeshift. Changing his attribute from moment to moment, he spent his days noncommittally. There were plenty of people who lived like that. Heck, I had been that way once too.

But most people wouldn't go so far as to forget their own attribute. Even if they changed themselves on the outside to match their partner, they would be loath to accept them inside their very attribute.

But Kouta had no such reaction. He would take people in not just superficially but to the bottom of his heart.

What I was most concerned about was that attribute taking hold after being accepted so.

It was practically a miracle that an attribute *hadn't* taken hold in him yet. As proof of that, he had already started becoming stained in mine.

Attributes are largely determined by one's family environment. When you're young, your family helps form the basis for your attribute. Whether you try to rebel against your parents or ingratiate yourself with them, through that process your attribute takes its form.

But for whatever reason, Kouta never created a baseline personality. He wasn't influenced by his family.

As for the reason no attribute had taken hold in him yet, it was likely due to the fact that he had never had any particularly deep relationships outside his family either. Given his disposition, despite his ability to make friends he was probably unable to make close friends or a girlfriend. In order to form deep relationships, people have to lay themselves bare. But Kouta had nothing *to* lay bare. He was empty. He had no way of forming such relationships. Although he didn't realize it himself, he had a habit of keeping others at an arm's length so as to avoid forming such deep relationships.

That was my hypothesis.

So with that to work off of, I contemplated how to save him from Yahara's clutches.

I had to first discern how exactly he had changed. But understanding that, I

could uncover the properties he didn't have naturally, correct them, and bring him back to normal. As long as I could do that, everything would be fine.

I was left with a nagging sense of discomfort.

But what specifically made me uncomfortable?

In order to collect my thoughts, I focused my vision on the tip of my mechanical pencil. You often saw people in manga and such close their eyes to focus, but my approach was the opposite. I would open my eyes wide and focus on a single point. It was even better if that point was something with traces of my magic in it. My mechanical pencil, which I used every day, fit that definition to a T. I stared at the tip for so long it got burned into my retinas. With that as my signal, my thoughts sharpened.

But right in the middle of all this, someone poked my back several times, breaking my concentration.

"C'mon, Sayuri! What do you want?"

Whispering so the teacher wouldn't hear me, I turned to glare at the culprit, Sayuri.

Her dyed-brown hair wash in a straight perm. Her loose sweater intentionally concealed her hands. And wearing a short skirt that accentuated her universally-esteemed legs was my classmate Sayuri Taneoka. Her willful, almond-shaped eyes shone with self-esteem and strong intent. From the first day of school I realized that she would be the center of attention in class, so I make sure to curry favor with her.

Sayuri's personality was strict, which I was fond of. And she wasn't the type to put others down. So even though I called myself a magus, we still got along quite well.

"You haven't taken any notes in forever. You've got something on your mind, right?"

She went on, grinning for some reason.

"It's about a guy, right?"

...Well, she wasn't wrong.

“Ooh, looks like I nailed it. If that’s the case, did Makino confess to you?”

“...Makino?”

That wasn’t the name that was on my mind.

“Oh, that’s not it? It got out that he had the hots for you, so I figured he must have finally confessed.”

Hearing this, I glanced at Makino’s seat. He happened to be glancing at me as well, and as our eyes met I returned his smile.

Makino did act over-familiar at times, but... was that really the case?

“Besides, doesn’t everyone already know that I’m going out with Kouta?”

“Yeah, but isn’t that, like, you know? Aren’t you two one of those fake couple-type deals? You know, where you go out with some random guy to keep the rest of the guys away? You know he doesn’t suit you, he’s like a background character or something.”

While that wasn’t true, the fact that we weren’t a normal couple was. But getting into the details would be messy, so I just laughed ambiguously.

Although she seemed to want to drag the conversation out and began poking me again, I simply ignored her.

Good grief, Sayuri... or rather, all high-school-age girls seemed to love talking about romance. Perhaps that was a simple form of magic.

Kouta.

Kouta. Kouta.

I want to protect him. No matter what.

At long last, it was finally lunch break.

We sat in the courtyard as always, each eating our own sandwiches. After my initial failure with the homemade lunches, I decided that I would try again once I had practiced a little more. Granted, I had only practiced once since then,

but... sooner or later!

With Yahara's glare no longer present, I was a little concerned that Yamazaki or whatever his name was would come hassle us again, but in the two weeks since the incident had come to light he hadn't shown up once.

I had decided that during this lunch period, I would take a different approach from this morning. In order to root out the cause of my discomfort, I wanted to see Kouta in as flat a condition as possible. To do that, I had to hide my concern and act just as bubbly as always. Given Kouta's disposition, no matter how down he was over Yahara's death, he would probably match my behavior and interact with me just as he always did.

Just as I expected, Kouta was talking perfectly normally. As we conversed, we laughed together, and I would occasionally unilaterally touch him on the back or shoulder.

"So in other words, you really *are* collecting lizard tails and hanging out with black cats, aren't you, Miki?"

As far as Kouta was concerned, this conversation didn't particularly have any deeper meaning.

"I don't, I'm telling you. I try to avoid following any formal conventions or anything. Although, it is true that certain rituals can strengthen magic's power."

"Are you saying that there's things you wouldn't do for the sake of magic?"

I was at a loss for words.

At my abrupt change, Kouta looked at me with worry on his face.

"Yup. After all, there are some things that if you go too far with, you become unable to go back."

...That's right. Ever since "that mistake," I had been suppressing my magic. Compared to how I was back then, I had much more common sense and much less power.

Is Kou even the one you're really tryin' to protect? ...Heh, you can't even refute it. What you're tryin' to protect by force-staining Kou's ass is your flimsy-ass, brittle little closed world.

I suddenly recalled the words Masato Yahara spit at me.

I had no retort for him. After all, I couldn't proudly puff up my chest and proclaim it to be false.

Even now, I wasn't certain that staining Kouta with my magic was the right thing to do.

"What do you mean by 'unable to go back'?"

After I had gone silent, Kouta asked me a question as a follow-up.

So with all my effort, I put on a smile.

"Well... you know how integrating into everyday society is pretty tough, right? You know that it's not something that just anyone can do, right?"

"You're right. My sister refuses to go to school, and a couple of my relatives are shut-ins, so what you're saying kind of resonates."

"I see." You being the way you are makes me worried for your sister as well, but I'll set that issue aside for now. "The more a person holes themselves up in their closed world, the more powerful their magic becomes. So if you're completely compatible with normal society, you can't use it. But if you entrust everything to magic, your closed world becomes all-encompassing. If that happens, the people around you will see you as a weirdo or a freak."

"Like Matsumi-senpai?"

"...Ahh, maybe."

I had heard about Ririko Matsumi from Kouta. Although the scanning she used surpassed my *interpersonal magic*, I knew how to explain parts of it.

She fixed her eyes in place and let out a strange voice that sounded like a machine noise. It was self-hypnosis that let her raise her powers of concentration to the extreme. A ritual designed to open her magical circuits. Normally to accomplish that you'd have to draw a magic square, mutilate yourself, or do some other form of large-scale preparation, but it seemed she didn't need to. This was probably because she believed in her magic implicitly.

Ririko Matsumi had isolated herself from society.

A commonplace worldview leads to relatively weak magic. Furthermore, it lacks appeal. Most people recognize that they're going to die without accomplishing anything or leaving behind any notable traces. Because it's so unappealing, some people want to discard it. There's plenty of types of dubious, half-baked kinds of magic, like cults, that try to quietly drive away commonplace worldviews.

Ririko Matsumi is a person who discarded her commonplace worldview.

"Miki, do you know anyone who became unable to go back?"

I did.

I knew of someone other than Ririko Matsumi.

And the person who drove her to that point was none other than myself.

"Nope. I just know this all in the abstract."

I lied.

I didn't have faith in myself to explain it right now.

"Huh."

Kouta casually saw through my lie. He had to have seen through it. But because he was Kouta, he didn't follow up on it.

And yet—

Discomfort.

The discomfort I had been looking for was right here.

"Miki, is something wrong?"

Kouta gazed at me worriedly. *He was staring at me. It was like he was trying to peer into me.*

That's it. Those eyes. Kouta's eyes weren't like that before. *Kouta was analyzing my responses.*

Kouta excelled at understanding others. But he never cared about their motives. He simply understood things as they were. It was precisely because he didn't care that he didn't have an attribute.

“Miki? What’s going on? Is it something I ^[8]did?”

I knew. A man whose eyes looked like that.

A man who called himself “I” like that.

Masato Yahara.

I lightly touched the red hair band, which appeared completely ordinary, that was keeping up my hair. It was an inexpensive hair band, the kind you could buy anywhere. But because it held up my hair, the place in my body most densely packed with magic, almost every day, it had gradually changed into something special. Perhaps if the right person looked at it, it would appear to glow orange.

I had a means to release him from the curse. For Kouta’s sake, I resolved to use this hair band in the *most effective way possible*.

But, why?

Even though I was doing it for Kouta’s sake, it felt like I was betraying him.

Kouta Hiiragi's Closed World (II)

As I put my textbooks in my bag, I thought back to what had happened at lunch.

Miki had clearly been acting strangely. I didn't mind the fact that she had been lying to me. Everyone has things they don't want to tell others.

But why had she seemed so afraid of me?

Was there some problem with me? ...Well, it wasn't impossible. She did mention something about her magic getting less potent. It was clear that something about me had changed.

But I didn't know what exactly had changed. In fact, I didn't know what kind of person I was to begin with.

And on top of that — I didn't really care.

As I was standing to leave, the voice of a man I once thought called out to me.

"Hiiragi, I have something I would like to ask you. Could I have a moment of your time?"

It turned out that Akiyama had simply been in poor health on that day. But what did he want with me now? We'd never held a meaningful conversation before.

Also, I felt like Akiyama's countenance had changed recently. It was like he hadn't been sleeping much; his eyes had bags under them, and his skin looked awful. His eyes glinted with a dim light, and his image had taken a slight departure from that of an honors student.

"When he was still with us, would it be correct to say that you were the one who with the closest with Yahara?"

"Huh? ...Uh, more or less."

"That must have been a harsh blow for you."

He probably didn't have any bad intentions, but it was clear he was holding back. In reality, I was likely only one mourning Masato's death.

Upon realizing that, I finally understood.

Masato's homicidal aspirations were the real deal, and he had every intention of carrying them out.

So ever since he died, I had been contemplating what the largest thing keeping him from committing murder was. Was it his conscience? His morals? His antipathy? Fear? The effect it would have on his future? After thinking about it, I realized that it was none of those. Anything within him that held him back would have simply be discarded if he fell into despair and abandoned himself.

So there had to be something outside of his heart that kept him from killing. Namely, his environment.

If someone committed a crime, their family would face repercussions as well. Even if he was a minor, his name would eventually come out, and the internet would expose the location of his house. And rather than receiving sympathy, the assailant's family would be treated as jointly responsible. You could easily imagine such a thing happening.

Masato wasn't so unimaginative a person as to ignore what would happen to his family, nor did he lack a sense of empathy. He wasn't some natural-born serial killer.

So Masato took it upon himself to create it. An environment where he could kill without regrets. A world filled with nothing but enemies and strangers.

Of course nobody would mourn his death in such an environment.

"And? What was it you wanted to ask me?"

"Ahh, I simply couldn't help but take an interest in Yahara's incident."

"Out of curiosity?"

"No, more like out of a sense of justice. I felt like there had to be something I was capable of doing."

I felt like Akiyama's words sounded rehearsed.

“I wonder, was it true that Yahara was involved in some rather unwholesome affairs? Well...I refer to affairs in the broad sense, by the way. Perhaps that alone makes it not unusual he was involved in this incident. There were various things published about him in those periodicals, weren't there?”

Although their authenticity was dubious, a number of magazines had published articles about how Masato was abusing stimulants, involved in the prostitution of minors, and was affiliated with an anarchist organization.

I didn't know how best to answer that, and Akiyama drew closer in response to my silence.

“Were you completely unaware of all that?”

“I knew about the stimulants. But he never mentioned anything about any gangs or prostitution rings or anything. He didn't show any signs of being involved with them, either. I'm pretty sure that's all just misinformation.”

In order to prepare the environment for his murder, he likely intimidated himself in things like that intentionally.

“Perhaps you weren't close enough to Yahara to involve you in things like that? Are you saying that he never to bring you into his group of delinquent companions?”

“Pretty much. He didn't involve me in sketchy stuff like that. He never even ate lunch with me, let alone tried to get me to smoke or anything. If we were around each other we'd chat, if the timing worked out we'd walk home together. But he definitely never tried to coerce me, and he never invited me anywhere. That was about the extent of our relationship.”

Bringing up the one time he called me out to that park late at night would be misleading, so I felt it would be better I not bring it up.

“I'm sure that if I ever stopped wanting to spend time around him and started avoiding him, he wouldn't have so much as spoken to me.”

“I see...”

His expression seemed somewhat dissatisfied. Had he been hoping I'd say something different?

...What *had* he been hoping for?

“So, why do you ask?”

I had a hunch that Akiyama didn't really want to hear about the incident. An odd feeling caught on my mind.

Putting his hand on his chin, Akiyama answered.

“I suspect that the reason that Yahara was killed was the fact that he was sticking his hand in dangerous places. Following that reasoning, I felt it was possible that you, as his friend, might be in danger of meeting a similar fate. Am I mistaken?”

I see. So my sense of unease was because I had the hunch that he was more interested in hearing about me than about Masato.

“In fact, I was thinking—”

“—that it would not be so strange for you to be killed as well.”

What was that?

I just had the oddest sensation.

Far beyond any of the unease I had been feeling up until now, it had bordered on outright discomfort.

“...What makes you space out so?”

“I, I'm not-”

Akiyama furrowed his brows in confusion.

“Well, I can hardly blame you for being a little out of it after having something like that happen to a friend of yours. You have bags under your eyes.”

The fact that he had bags under his seemed to be lost on him. Was Akiyama also plagued by something related to Masato's death? Was that why he was asking me all this? But if that was the case, what would he, who got along with Masato about as well as dogs got along with cats, have to worry about?

The unease got stronger. Something was off.

As I pondered such thoughts, I heard a loud, rude voice.

“Oy, is Akiyama around?”

Peering through the door was, for some reason, Yamazaki. The man who had been harassing me and Miki the other day.

I wouldn't have thought Akiyama would willingly spend time with a person like Yamazaki. In fact, he grimaced more than he had during our whole conversation.

“I'll see you later, Hირagi. Do be careful, now.”

Raising his hand uncomfortably, Akiyama turned his back on me.

“Um, are you okay? That senpai isn't forcibly dragging you around or anything, is he?”

“Hm, well... He isn't exactly doing me any favors by coming to my classroom like this, but... It's no cause for concern.”

Akiyama walked briskly to where Yamazaki was waiting. After exchanging a few words, Akiyama lead the two of them out of the classroom.

Everything about this was suspicious. But Akiyama wasn't looking for help, so I had no way of getting involved. And besides, I didn't particularly want to get involved, nor did I want to help him.

Masato's body had been discarded deep in the mountains. The autopsy found the cause of death to be a stab wound in his chest. The body was about a week old when it was discovered, so the crime was estimated to have been committed somewhere between May 25th and May 28th. The fact that Matsumi couldn't get reception on Masato's information on June 2nd corroborated that. The range on reception was this city, and by then Masato wasn't in this world, let alone the city.

The investigation was also going poorly. First of all, they didn't even know

where he died. On top of that, his acquaintances were largely unknown, and it was difficult to narrow down who might have had a motive. The group he had been interacting with hadn't even known his name.

The last person to interact with him, a female company worker, gave an anonymous interview about him calling out to her near a subway station. She claimed that he had been acting oddly, saying things like "I'll kill you." That was what led to the inference that he was using some manner of stimulant.

But that wasn't it. I had seen firsthand how he had begun acting strangely in response to Matsumi-senpai's scanning.

The mass media had also gotten fixated on the idea that he might have intentionally put himself in some sort of dangerous situation. But if Masato had fallen into despair to the point of taking suicidal actions, he would have killed someone instead. I had grasped Masato to the point of being sure of that.

Masato's murderous impulses wouldn't have been directed at himself. Only people who saw life as cheap wouldn't differentiate between killing themselves and others. And the high value Masato placed on life was the reason he longed to kill in the first place.

So getting killed certainly wasn't part of Masato's plan. Perhaps the killer was someone he knew, someone he didn't expect?

If nothing else, his killer was an amateur. After they disposed of the body in the mountains, it was found relatively easily. And they didn't even bother making it look like an accident or a suicide, which led to it being investigated as a murder and the subsequent autopsy.

I was on classroom cleaning duty, and my musings kept me from finishing until it was rather late. Miki had been dragged off by some friends and had already returned home.

I headed for the front gate alone. The throngs of reporters, who had been crawling all over the school when the incident first came to light, had more or less dispersed.

If I had to compare, it seemed that the world at large was much less

concerned with the details and perpetrator of Masato's death and more with criticisms of his life. However, the fact that Masato was a victim wasn't under dispute, so most of the major news companies recognized that Masato may not have had any direct involvement in the case and weren't focusing much on his circumstances. That meant that most of the people still gathered in front of the gate were journalists from gossip magazines of questionable repute.

"...Excuse me."

Someone called out to me from behind. Although I initially thought to ignoring them, thinking that they were a member of such a publication, I eventually turned around after realizing that the late hour made it unlikely that the question would be of that tone.

Before me stood a girl from another school. Her face was plain, and she didn't make much of an impression. She bore a dark expression, and her eyes repeatedly glanced for side to side. But as if by habit, her mouth alone was upturned.

"Is this... the school where Masato Yahara went?"

"It is..."

"It is, isn't it..."

On that note, she trailed off. There was clearly a follow-up question, but he was hesitating.

Thinking that perhaps I had met her before, I observed her face, but I had no recollection of her.

"Sorry to bother you. That's all I wanted."

In the end, she never gave her follow-up. Looking downwards, she quickly left.

What was that? Was she an acquaintance of Masato's or something? Even so, she was acting rather suspiciously...

Tilting my head at the bizarre encounter, I gazed at the female student. Then suddenly, a small back that I *did* remember appeared next to her.

Ririko Matsumi.

That's it! Matsumi-senpai might know something about the incident!

With that flash of inspiration, I ran after that small back.

"Matsumi-senpai!"

Matsumi-senpai had taken some sort of interest in me, so she would probably greet me with a smile. At least, that was what I expected.

"..."

But not only did she not turn and smile at me, she didn't turn my direction at all. Even when I got close enough to stare at her, she just kept plodding on slowly and ignoring me.

"...Senpai?"

Thinking that perhaps she hadn't noticed me, I tapped her on the shoulder. As a result, she finally saw me. But her deadpan expression didn't change.

I then remembered how Matsumi-senpai had collapsed and began vomiting after reciting the information from Masato's scanning. Perhaps she hadn't fully recovered yet? Or maybe she was angry at me for backing away from her before I eventually set her free?

As if she had truly turned into a machine, Matsumi-senpai gave no signs of life.

"Senpai, it's me. Kouta Hiiragi."

".....hm."

At the sound of my name, she finally gave a slight response, slightly raising her eyebrows.

"Hii...ragi?"

"That's right! I'm Kouta Hiiragi! I have something I wanted to ask you!"

"Hiiragi... The white Hiiragi..."

Although Matsumi-senpai was staring daggers at me, her eyes seemed like they were out of focus.

"No."

“Huh?”

“No. You’re not Hiiragi.”

“What are you talking about, Senpai? Of course I’m Hiiragi.”

But it didn’t look like Matsumi-senpai even heard my rebuttal. Looking away from me, she resumed her plodding.

I wanted to stop her, but decided against it due to her strange demeanor. One way or another, it didn’t look like I’d be able to communicate meaningfully with her.

I sighed heavily.

Was she simply an “apparatus” after all?

Unable to hold back my laughter, I looked up.

Once I did, I was met with a surprise. Standing right next to me with eyes wide open was Akiyama.

“Huh? What are you...?”

“Are you and Ririko Matsumi close?”

He was asking rather intently.

“I don’t know about close, but we’ve talked a few times.”

Akiyama gazed at Matsumi-senpai’s receding back. His expression was clearly warped with disgust. His hatred for Matsumi-senpai was quite evident.

“Um... did you finish helping that blond senpai?”

But instead of answering my question, he returned with one of his own, the disgust never fading from his face.

“Do have a habit of getting involved with people like her?”

““People like her’?”

“Forgive my wording, but people with problems. Ririko Matsumi, Masato Yahara, and perhaps we should count Miki Kouzuki as well.”

“It’s not like I’m intentionally hanging out with weird people...”

“But you’re awfully close to a number of them. And you don’t seem to be particularly close to anyone else.”

He said such rude things so casually.

“I mean, it’s true that I don’t have many close friends...”

“And you say that you don’t seek those kind of people out deliberately? If that’s the case, then perhaps you hold some sort of fascination from their perspective?”

Irritation? Or maybe it was impatience? As Akiyama continued prattling on, it became more and more clear that something about him was off.

He seemed to realize this, and quietly exhaled while calming his expression.

“I apologize. It would appear I’ve said some rather untoward things. Please forget I said any of that. I guess the incident has just made me a little high-strung.”

Akiyama spoke.

“I’m worried about you, Hiiragi.”

Again.

It was happening again.

That strange sensation.

“What do you mean by ‘worried about’?”

“Hmm? I mean that I’m worried about you getting caught up in this incident, of course. What else might I mean?”

Thinking about it logically, no other meaning made sense.

But I knew.

This man didn’t care at all about my well-being.

He hated me, and was on high alert.

It was all a deception. The expression he was twisting his face into, one of outspoken concern, was nothing more than a mask.

Akiyama was concealing his true nature. Or perhaps he wasn't aware of it.

But I could see his filthy, corrupt true form, like a swamp of illegally dumped oil.

Ahh, I finally understood why Masato hated Akiyama so much.

Akiyama was like Masato's opposite. Masato had turned his back on the world. Whereas if necessary to traverse the world, Akiyama would readily use others as stepping stones.

"What's the matter?"

Akiyama's smile was warped. No, his expression was the same as before. But even if it hadn't changed, once you knew his true self the connotation changed. If you peeled off a single layer of his skin, his evil nature would be plainly visible. Although up until now I had thought of him as nothing but a simple intellectual, I could no longer sense anything from those bespectacled, slit eyes but cold-blooded evil. If it was for his own sake, this man could commit any crime while still thinking himself pure.

It was like an optical illusion. Once you had looked under the facade of an honors student, you couldn't see him any other way. You stopped being able to see him as anything but cruel and self-righteous.

His smile was a sneer. His sympathy was cajolery. His kindness was wiliness.

"...I have to get going."

I left Akiyama, practically fleeing.

This was the first time I had felt this emotion. I had never harbored this emotion towards myself or towards another. And what's more, it was strong enough to make my head throb dully.

I was perplexed. I couldn't believe that I, of all people, could feel this way.

But I was certain of it.

I—

—despised Shuuichi Akiyama.

“So, like, the sky above the hot spring was twinkling like crazy. We’d heard that there were a bunch of fireflies nearby, so we figured that it was fireflies got really excited, but it seemed kinda unnatural so then we realized that it wasn’t. So, what do you think those lights were?”

As planned, I paid Miki a visit at her house on Sunday.

I suspected that her room would be ominous and packed with magical paraphernalia, but I was completely off-mark. Although her bookshelves did feature a number of books on magic, the room was painted a uniform white. If anything, it seemed a bit plain for a girl of her age, sacrificing stylishness for a wholesome atmosphere.

On a similar note, despite Miki’s gorgeous looks she never wore makeup, and the plain clothes she was wearing were casual and not conspicuous in the least.

“Would you believe it! Those lights were the flashes of smartphone cameras! Apparently some boys got a room above the open-air bath, right, and they were having themselves a photo shoot! They’re the worst! And what’s worse, now those dumb boys have seen my soft fair skin! You don’t have a monopoly on it any more! Oh, I feel so sorry for you! And to think how my chest and such swelled at the thought of you eventually being the first one to see me naked! ...Ah, but there’s some good news on that front! When that happened, I had a towel firmly wrapped around my chest! And we all lived happily ever after!”

I felt like the room and her outfit didn’t really mesh with her boundlessly bubbly personality.

She was putting no small amount of effort into consciously manufacturing that personality. I had initially been tricked by her audacious conduct, but in reality she was quite shy. If she couldn’t get a decent read on the other party, she tended to freeze up. Along those lines, the reason she hadn’t immediately approached me when school started up could have been that she was trying to carefully examine me first.

But why would she go so far to create that bubbly personality?

Thanks to her amiability, she could get away without being hated despite being seen as a weirdo. In order to receive that benefit, I assumed she was intentionally making use of her smile.

Did this too have something to do with Miki being a magus?

“...Kouta, you aren’t listening to me, are you?”

Miki puffed out her cheeks cutely.

“...Sorry. I had something on my mind.”

Normally that would be the end of that line of discussion, but Miki pressed her lips firmly together. Worrying that I had killed the mood, I said “sorry” again.

After a little while, Miki spoke in a low voice.

“Those eyes, they’re awful.”

“Huh?”

“They’re awful, it feels like they’re analyzing me.”

With a serious look on her face, Miki went on.

“I mentioned this before, but Kouta, you’re getting worse at taking in my magic. Do you have any idea why?”

“Umm... is it because I’ve grown accustomed to it, maybe?”

“That’s not it. The reason you’re not taking in my magic well is because of the extent to which your attribute has changed. Someone other than me started staining you with their attribute. That’s why my magic can’t reach you. ...You know who that is, right?”

“Not really...”

“You weren’t conscious of it? ...Well, I guess that makes sense. Self-consciousness isn’t really something you’re capable of. You yourself don’t know what kind of person you are, so you wouldn’t have any way of noticing changes. Then I should put this clearly. Kouta, you’re becoming stained in Masato Yahara’s attribute.”

“Masato’s...?”

“It’s to a pretty severe degree; you’re already starting to think kinda like him. That’s what those analytic eyes are expressing.”

“But, Masato’s already dead. There’s no way for him to influence me. Why, after all this time...”

“To the contrary, it’s like it’s *because* he died... Here, let me explain. Right now, you’re evoking him.”

Another new word sprung up.

“You’re making a face like you don’t get it. But it’s like, you don’t want to forget about him, right?”

“Of course I don’t.”

Everyone would soon forget about Masato. Without even trying to, even his parents would likely forget he had ever existed. Masato didn’t have any human connections. That was the environment he himself crafted.

Which meant that if I forgot about Masato as well, he would truly disappear from this world. He would disappear without a trace, as if he had never existed in the first place.

That’s why I spent so much time thinking about him. So I could still stand face-to-face with him.

“You want to remember him so badly, you’re calling him to your side. That’s what evocation magic is.”

“Hold up a second. If I can use magic, doesn’t that kinda mean that I’m taking on *your* attribute, Miki?”

“It doesn’t. I told you that anyone can use magic, remember? And I told you that you had magical talent, right?”

She had mentioned that.

“If you took on my attribute, you’d be able to comprehend and master magic. But that and just being able to use are two totally separate things. For example, Yahara was a powerful magus. But he couldn’t control it. Magic is like a chained

beast - it can lash out at any time. I don't know if Yahara knew how powerful his influence was, but it looked like he tried really hard to keep other people from getting involved with him..."

In a way, him minimizing his influence was probably connected with him creating an environment in which he could kill.

"You know, Kouta, you have a talent for mimicry. In fact, I've never met someone who could imitate people as precisely as you. You don't just copy their attribute, you copy their capacity as well. I guess it's kinda like being able to copy someone's results just by copying their batting form? That gets across how amazing it is, right? And it gets across how insane it is too, right? ...So I realized that I had to split you two apart so you couldn't use that monstrous magic of his."

Even without processing it through the lens of the value system of, I could tell that continuing to spend time around Masato was dangerous. So I understood why she had been so worried.

Kouta, you've already completed the first step of evocation, which is creating an artificial astral body. ...Um, to put it in a way that's easier to understand, you created a firm 'image' of Yahara himself in your head. Am I wrong?"

She... wasn't wrong.

The image I had of Masato in my head was developed enough for me to hold a conversation with him.

"Normally, that 'image' won't do anything. When an author keeps images of their characters in their head, the worst that'll happen is they'll come across as a bit odd. But your 'image' of Yahara is, regardless of your will, going and acting on its own. It's leaking into the outside world. You can tell if you just look."

Without thinking, I stared at my hand, but of course nothing about it was any different from normal.

"That 'image' of Yahara is trying to entrench itself in you in order to exist. After you evoke it, it'll possess you. Your barbarous name^[9] - it's like an incantation, but if he learns it, and speaks it, you won't be able to stay yourself any more."

So, in other words the kind of thing a psychic would refer to as “possession”?

“...What should I do?”

As far as I was concerned, not having been aware this was happening in the first place, I didn’t much care what my image did.

But I knew that Miki saw this as a huge problem and wanted to stop it. And I wanted to help her to the extent of my abilities.

“You don’t have to do anything, Kouta.”

Miki pursed her lips, displaying her resolve.

Her entire body was giving off energy, and it felt like she was at the center of a swirl of light.

“I’ll stop it for you.”

Miki moved her hand behind her head. Her hair fluttered gently, filling the room with the smell of shampoo. My first, out-of-place impression was that her hair was surprisingly long when she let it down. She had unfastened the red hair band that always held up her ponytail.

Why was it, I wondered, that her eyes were fixed in place as if she had been hit over the head with a log. Was she trying to perceive something? Was she trying to appeal to me? As a result, I couldn’t get my thoughts straight. I just stared at her dumbfounded.

While I was stunned, Miki drew her face close to mine. Extremely close.

Huh?

I couldn’t even let out a surprised voice.

Because.

Miki’s lips were blocking mine.

As if a switch had been flipped in me, my thoughts forcibly ground to a halt.

The image in front of my eyes felt like something far off, something unrelated

to me. My sense of reality vanished, as if I had been sucked into the other side of a television.

But the sensation was still there. Miki's lips were soft. They felt nice.

Miki drew away.

As the pleasant sensation faded, the implication of what had just happened finally hit me.

That was a kiss.

Miki kissed me.



The moment I realized this, it felt like explosions were going off inside my head. Like a baby that couldn't hold its neck steady, my head bobbed about frantically. My eyes were having trouble focusing on Miki, who was right beside me.

"You're still shaking. I made you shake. Now it's fixed."

Simply seeing those lips move was bewitching, and I began to feel dizzy.

Meanwhile, Miki fastened the red hair band she had removed from her hair around my left wrist. It made a sharp sound as it snapped tight.

Snap.

That noise echoed inside my head as if I were standing in a gigantic hall. The pain from the snap wasn't just in my wrist, it spread throughout my entire body in tandem with a certain sense of comfort. As the pain diffused, suddenly my swelling head felt as though it were deflating. My head, which had been on the brink of boiling from the heat before, felt like it had been suddenly thrown in the Arctic Ocean.

Was I back to normal?

"Miki...?"

"I'm sorry."

Perhaps thinking that my soft utterance of her name had been a rebuke, she went on.

"I know this wasn't fair, but I couldn't think of any other way. I couldn't think of any way to save you without using magic. Even if you didn't want me to, I had no choice but to do it by force..."

"Magic...? That was magic just now?"

"Yeah. I'm really sorry."

I see. That wasn't a kiss just now.

She was just putting our lips together.

I was overcome with surprise. I didn't know what to think of it. I didn't really mind that she had used magic.

But I was beset upon by an unfamiliar emotion.

I didn't know what "it" was. It felt similar to a blend of rage, sadness, dejection, exasperation, and disappointment, yet it was different. One thing was certain, though. "It" wasn't a pleasant emotion.

"Kouta, make sure you don't take off that band, okay?"

Not having reached a conclusion regarding my emotion, I glanced at my left wrist.

"That's a charm containing my full-strength magic. If any fate tries to influence your will, this will definitely change that fate for the better."

From the looks of it, it was the same as any other hair band the shops nearby would sell. But I could feel it tightening not just on my wrist but deep, deep within me.

"Can you feel it? Then I guess maybe I didn't need the warning. You shouldn't be able to remove it by your own power."

There was no way that was possible. Let's try taking it off, shall we?

".....Huh?"

...It was no good. I couldn't do it. ...And for that matter, I didn't want to.

I knew that I was at least physically capable of removing it. But I was oddly reluctant to. Even if I knew logically that the work required to do so could hardly be called work, it felt like I were being sent to a battlefield and was hardly inclined to go. It didn't feel like I was being compelled not to, removing it simply seemed tiresome. I couldn't be bothered to.

So this was Miki's magic. So it was capable of doing this much.

"It's not like I could just do that to anyone. I was only able to do it to you because of how much time we've spent together."

Miki should have been glad that her magic worked, but instead she looked almost depressed.

"...Let me give you an excuse, at least. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't want to. If it was anyone else, I wouldn't have even considered it."

She wasn't lying. I could tell by her expression. Miki held me in good favor, and I likewise.

But in the end, that kiss was for the sake of magic.

If she hadn't had that reason, it was something she couldn't have done.

"Sorry, Miki. I'm going to head home for the day."

Her face going white, Miki grabbed my hand as I stood to stop me.

"I'm sorry. ...I'm sorry!"

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not mad at you, and I don't hold you in contempt or anything. If anything, I thought that was pretty Miki-like of you. But if we're together any longer today, it'll just get awkward. So I'm going to head home. That's all there is to it."

Upon hearing that, Miki softly let released my hand. But she didn't look relieved, and she didn't lift her eyes from the ground.

She probably realized it as well. That our relationship couldn't possibly continue in the same way as before.

Without uttering another word of reassurance, I headed for the door.

"Can I just ask one thing?"

Miki's lips were trembling pitifully.

"You don't hate me now, do you...?"

But when I heard that, the last of my sympathy vanished.

"You don't have to worry about that. But—"

My next words might be unkind. But if I didn't say them, I wouldn't be able to settle my raging emotions.

"I have to wonder, why do you spend so much time confirming my feelings without voicing your own even once?"

Taken aback, Miki's eyes widened as she tried to keep her mouth under control.

I was never wrong when it came to inferring other people's emotions. Normal

people make sure conjectures through the lens of their own value system, distorting the result, but because I had no such filter I could make accurate evaluations.

But for whatever reason, my sensors seemed to be amiss when it came to Miki.

Miki held no romantic feelings towards me.

I had been under the misapprehension that she felt something similar. But she had just told me quite clearly that she didn't.

The reason I was mistaken was because she *did* harbor affection towards me. But it was likely similar to the emotion one would feel towards an abandoned puppy. Miki was a kind person, so if she saw an abandoned puppy she would probably take it with her against her better judgement. She would then become emotionally attached to it, and in return for her affection it would probably come to love her.

But the world had no shortage of abandoned puppies.

There were plenty of people who could replace me.

I hadn't realized. At some point, I had come to expect things of her. I felt that if anyone could locate my nonexistent contents, it would be Miki.

"I won't avoid you or anything like that. If you talk to me, I'll talk back. If you come visit me, I'll be happy. I would never come to hate you. I know just how nice of a person you are, Miki."

But I had to say it.

"But let's not play at being lovers any more. We're different people, after all."

I wasn't just talking about Miki. My family was other people. Masato was another person. No matter how close we were, we were different people. People were all in confined worlds created by their own value systems. Worlds that other people could never enter.

"But if we do that, Yahara will--"

"It's not your fault, Miki. It's mine. Of course it is."

I spoke as if to interrupt her. Perhaps my voice came out a bit loud.

“Later.”

I left her room.

Miki was likely on the verge of tears. I was extrapolating from experience.

But that might not be true. After all, I didn't know the first thing about Miki.

I was scared of confirming it, so I didn't turn around.

If she hadn't been tearing up but instead smiling, I wouldn't know what to believe any more.

But that was the magnitude of the misunderstanding I had made. If I had kept going out with Miki after that, a conclusive contradiction would have been born. One that couldn't be taken back.

So I put an end to our farce of a relationship before that could happen.

In the end, Miki's actions might have ended in failure.

After all, she made me aware. Aware of the fact that I was under Masato's influence.

A negative chain reaction had started. The domino effect. Once a piece fell, the paradise we had so miraculously constructed all came crashing down.

Another corpse showed up at the school.

I had no idea how long this chain reaction would continue. But there was one thing I did know.

“...Kou, can you hear me?”

Even “I^[10]” would be a target of that negativity.

Shuuichi Akiyama's Closed World (I)

“People are like garbage.”

Whenever I saw people gathered, this line from a famous animated movie^[11] sprung to mind. And I suspected that there were no shortage of people who shared my sentiment.

While this may not hold true for individuals, when people come together in groups it is due to hatred. They perceive other people as combustible waste and drop bombs in the place of incinerators. In any case, they can't help their desire to set garbage alight.

Let us suppose that the entity known as God truly exists. That He is a being that transcends humanity and gazes out over Earth from above. If we hold that to be the case, then it follows that chaos and disorder please Him. God does not desire tranquility. This is surely because He is displeased when such inferior creatures lose themselves in delusions of grandeur. With His invisible hand, he leads humanity to the slaughter. He does this not for amusement, nor to stave off boredom, but because of a visceral disgust, much the kind that you or I would feel upon gazing on an outbreak of insects.

I suddenly noticed that my reverie had delayed me in my task of duplicating the words on the blackboard, and I began frantically scrawling.

I reflected upon my irregular thoughts. These thoughts were certainly not desirable. Perhaps the reason I was having them was because we had been learning about how the strong systematically weeded out all others across history?

That was divergent from my ideals. The strong and the weak certainly did exist. That was why I was determined to become strong and, instead of plundering from the weak, extend them a hand of salvation. To lead them justly. That was the only method by which true peace could be attained.

What stood in my way, then, was the kind of evil that would consume

mankind in irrationality. I had to destroy it. ...I see, my thoughts just now were the result of my hatred towards evil becoming misdirected towards humanity itself.

Evil, huh.

I gazed at the seat behind me. It appeared he was absent today, so the seat was empty. It was the seat belonging to a man who could very well be described as evil incarnate.

In my sixteen years of life, I had never met a man so thoroughly twisted as Masato Yahara. The reason for that lay not in his depravity, nor in his stupidity. There were likely countless men more opposed to society and more idiotic than him.

But upon drawing Yahara's jeers, I recognized wicked nature for what it was. Masato Yahara was quite literally a monster. He consumes people in as direct a way as possible. His tentacles reach deep within people's souls. His value system is so warped that the only way he can confirm his own existence is through the destruction of others.

The runaway train that is Yahara long since became derailed. And he believes that by running people over, he can right his course. But such a thing is of course absurd. A derailed train cannot find its way back onto the tracks. It will simply destroy and kill everything in its path, only stopping once it crashes and destroys itself.

If left to his own devices, he will no doubt continue consuming people. Like a candy he's grown bored of, he will chew up and spit out those precious, irreplaceable souls.

Modern-day laws are too lenient on such wrong-doers. But even though we all harbor such feeling of dissatisfaction, society refuses to change. A rotten human cannot be rehabilitated and will continue to rot, and much the rotten orange from a line in a certain school-based drama^[12] will rot everything around it as well.

But the filthy rabble of our world continue wriggling about with nary a care. It's repulsive beyond belief.

Thus the strong have a duty to root out evil. In that act, they elegantly save the weak.

Ahh, it's almost embarrassing how much I love justice, how much I want to become a hero.

On that night, I spotted Masato Yahara on my way home from prep school.

In the end, I tested him. It was a test to determine if his life had worth. He failed spectacularly; in fact, he scored zero points.

And so I justly killed him.

The first thing I had to figure out was how to dispose of the body. No matter how just my actions were, even if everyone approved of them, today's laws would never acquit a murderer. Thus I had to cover it up.

Because he was planning on killing me in the first place, Yahara was kind enough to die in a place where he would not be quickly found. The optimal outcome for me would be for his death itself not to come to light and for him to simply be treated as a missing person, with nobody knowing the truth of the incident.

But it was difficult to imagine the body going forever without being found. This defunct factory had traces of people coming and going, with lanterns and blankets and such lying around. The people who came and went were likely filth of Yahara's ilk.

It would be best to dispose of the body somewhere harder to come across. If the body was found like this, it would be treated as evidence of a crime, autopsied, and the entire affair would then be handled as a murder investigation.

Ideally the body wouldn't be found, and it wouldn't become an incident. If I could dump the body in the mountains without being seen, I could avoid being caught.

But because I was only sixteen, I didn't have a driver's license. I couldn't think

of any way to transport my grim baggage without being seen.

I needed an accomplice. But who? My parents... even if they acknowledged my justice, the sight of a corpse would cause them to lose their nerve and recommend that I turn myself in. Even if they held strong convictions, people who were faint of heart wouldn't do.

I could think of a few adults I respected, but any of them would get cold feet once they saw a corpse, and without looking at the big picture would recommend that I turn myself in. Nobody had as strong a sense of justice as I did, nor would helping me provide any benefit for them.

I was at a loss. I couldn't think of anyone.

I couldn't figure out my next step, so with some reluctance I temporarily left the scene. If somebody happened upon this place, that alone would be curtains for me.

I wiped up the blood from the knife and wiped down the places I had touched with a handkerchief to get rid of my fingerprints. Thankfully, you couldn't see the spurts of blood against my black uniform. After leaving the factory, I was able to make my way to the station without running into anyone.

All in it, it was quite a mental burden on me. As soon as I got home and layed down on my bed, I slept like a log.

I woke up. Instantly, the gears in my head began turning. The first thing I did was check on my smartphone to see whether or not Yahara's body had been discovered. I checked a number of news sites, but there didn't appear to be any articles indicating as such. A real-time search didn't show any traces either.

After descending the stairs and offering rushed greetings to my family, I hopped in the shower. As I lathered my hair, I racked my brains for a way to dispose of the unfortunate corpse.

I could dismember it. But while that was the conventional way to transport a body, I wasn't exactly inclined to. Even if it was originally the monster that was

Yahara, it was unmistakably a human body. The psychological burden would likely be substantial. And in the one-in-a-million chance the body was discovered, the fact that it could no longer pass for an accident was another strike against this method.

So I was back to wanting to transport the body as it was to somewhere people wouldn't find it, then disposing of it. That conclusion hadn't changed.

There was no school on Saturdays, so I ran searches for terms related to the incident on my phone while watching the news in the living room. It was odd for me to be fiddling with my phone instead of studying, so my family seemed somewhat suspicious, but I doubted they suspected me of murder. I needn't pay them much mind.

I wanted to transport the body by vehicle, but I still couldn't come up with an accomplice. Although it was of course too late at this point, events already proceeding as they were, I began to regret having killing Yahara. If I had killed him in a more thought-out manner, I could have avoided this whole mess.

The next time I have to kill someone, I'll make sure to think it out first.

Someone I have to kill, on the same level as Masato Yahara. I wonder who that could be?

“—”

With that thought fresh in my mind, I thought of a partner. Returning to my room, I began to think of ways to sway him to my side. At the moment, he and I had essentially no common ground.

But then I thought of an extremely simple method.

I spent the rest of Saturday preparing, and then it was Sunday. At three in the afternoon on the dot, I stood in front of a local convenience store. I entered the shop, and after a few uses of the ATM had successfully withdrawn a million yen^[13]. After consistently saving my allowance and my New Year's money, that sum amounted to my net worth.

Not seeing the man I was searching for, I headed outside and was greeted with the sight of my target wearing the shop's uniform and listlessly taking out the trash. He didn't seem to be on break, but he was smoking regardless. Because I lived nearby, I happened to know that he would be working part-time at this hour on Sundays.

"Yamazaki-senpai."

Ryuusuke Yamazaki turned to me while holding his cigarette in his mouth, his expression sullen. At any rate, it looked like his vulgar blond hair was taking a few points off his IQ.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm Shuuichi Akiyama, the representative of class 1-2."

"No, like, who the fuck *are* you? What business would a high and mighty class rep like you have with someone like me? Don't fuckin' tell me you're gonna rat me out to the school for smoking."

Ignoring his idiotic question, I got straight to the point.

"I heard that you know how to drive. Do you have your own car?"

I had seen him drive a black station wagon to get her, but I wanted to confirm it just in case.

Likely excited to brag about his car, Yamazaki's face lit up.

"Yeah, I'm working here to pay 'er off. ...What's your deal, you like my car? You wanna go for a ride in the passenger seat, huh? Sorry man, that seat's reserved for chicks who put out. I'm not into that fag stuff."

Not wanting to play along with his vulgar banter, I pulled out the million I had just withdrawn and handed it to him. At the sight of such a large quantity of cash, Yamazaki's eyes went wide.

"Wha... You...! The fuck's this cash for?"

His reaction was exactly what I expected, and I struggled to stifle my laughter.

With his mouth hanging open and a stupid expression plastered on his face, Yamazaki didn't even wait for a proper explanation to begin counting the bills.

With his glittering eyes and his agitated, wild breathing, he was the very image of a swine unable to contain itself at the sight of slop. Unable to defy his brain's newfound addiction, he would no doubt act exactly as I needed him to.

"I have a favor I need to ask of you. Would you be willing to undertake it?"

Yamazaki stopped the car in the parking lot of a defunct convenience store near the site of the factory. I was slightly concerned about being seen, but thanks to the various illegally-parked cars we weren't exactly conspicuous. If we didn't stay long, I doubted it would be a problem.

"So Akiyama, you're really gonna pay me a mil for one day's work? Also, where the hell are we?"

After stopping the car, Yamazaki was understandably on guard as he surveyed the area.

"I didn't lie. More importantly, did you prepare everything I asked you to?"

Wanting to avoid creating links between myself and Yamazaki, I hadn't told him my phone number or LINE ID. He seemed like a somewhat careless man, so I was concerned he hadn't bought everything I had requested.

"Yeah, it's all in the trunk. Whatcha gonna do with all that?"

I verified the contents of the trunk. Inside was a large black vinyl sheet, a roll of cloth tape, and some rope. Tools to transport a corpse.

"Everything seems to be in order. We'll be carrying it all to the site of that factory."

"...No complaints here, I guess."

Although he had some misgivings, the million yen sapped his desire to object and he walked inside the building.

"Fuck, it stinks in here!"

Just as Yamazaki said, the moment we stepped inside we were greeted by a smell reminiscent of a mound of rotting fish. It was so like Yahara to resemble

trash to the end. Of course he would stink if he rotted — and as soon as that thought crossed my mind, I reflected. I left the corpse here all this time, but due to the smell the odds of it being discovered were higher than I had projected.

“Wait, that’s-”

The body was lying there, wrapped in blankets. The blankets were stained red with blood.

“It’s a corpse.”

Yamazaki’s face initially contorted, but eventually settled into a vulgar grin.

“I get it. Now I get what you’re havin’ me do.”

On the off chance that he had gotten cold feet when faced with a corpse, it was thinkable that he would reject my request. Showing him the cash up front was a countermeasure against that. While people can put up with losing an opportunity to gain something, they exhibit extreme resistance to giving up something they initially thought was theirs.

But it seemed my fear had been unfounded.

“Makes sense that you’d pull out that mil, then. Hell, you’re practically gettin’ off cheap.”

I hadn’t been expecting him to suggest I turn myself in. So that was his response, hmm. He didn’t examine my complexion, nor did he take interest in the corpse itself — his first instinct was to try and wring more money out of me.

Thank goodness he was so faithful to his desires.

“You the one who offed him?”

“That was the result, yes. It was legitimate self-defence, but there isn’t anybody who can verify that.”

“I getcha, I getcha. So you got no choice but to hide it.”

The corners of his mouth upturned, Yamazaki drew near the corpse with no sign of hesitation. To my surprise, he turned over the blankets himself. His lack of resistance made me doubt whether or not he might be a psychopath.

“Huh? ...Yo, Akiyama! This fucker’s Masato Yahara!

“That is indeed my classmate Masato Yahara. You can piece together why I had to come all the way out here, I gather?”

“This guy jumped you, and when you fought back he ended up eatin’ it, something along those lines, right? Damn, I always had him pegged for one of those guys who wouldn’t die even if you killed ‘em, but he up and died pretty damn easily, huh?”

“Did you and Masato Yahara know each other?”

“Nah, I just heard that he was one bad motherfucker and steered clear of him. Y’know, there were those rumors that he took down a whole gang and that he was the leader of some prostitution ring. And I heard that one of my senpai’s friends tried to get up in this guy’s business for being cheeky or some shit, and this guy almost stabbed him.”

I was assaulted by waves of repugnance. It would appear my decision to kill him had been correct.

“So what’s up next, boss?”

“First, we’ll conceal the body in the blankets and vinyl sheet and carry it out. We’ll take the weapon with us too. I’m pretty sure I wiped off all the blood already, but I’ll double-check so that on the off chance there’s any left I can wipe it off. Once all that is finished, it shouldn’t be possible for anyone to narrow the scene of the crime down to this location.”

“Other than me, that is.”

I wondered if that was a veiled threat.

“Heh heh.”

Without thinking, I laughed inwardly.

He reacted just as I suspected he would, without a micron of deviation.

Ahh, thank goodness.

Choosing Ryuusuke Yamazaki as my partner truly was the right decision.

Once we had loaded the body into his trunk, I left the transportation and

disposal to Yamazaki and headed home. After travelling by train, bus, foot the previous day, I had found an ideal disposal site deep in the mountains. If Yamazaki followed my instructions and dug a hole and buried him in it, it was unlikely Yahara's corpse would ever be discovered. Leaving that task to Yamazaki alone caused me no end of anxiety, but it was less dangerous than me being seen in his car, so I didn't have much choice. In a perfect world, nobody would think that Yamazaki and I had any relationship.

But one of my calculations was off.

I had underestimated how incompetent Yamazaki was.

One week had passed since Yamazaki took the body up into the mountains. It was Monday morning, and as had become a habit for me I was scrolling through a real-time news feed on my phone when my drowsiness was blasted away. There was a posting about a body being discovered in the aforementioned mountains. Leaping from my bed, I ran into the living room and clung to the television. The news was reporting that Masato Yahara's body had been discovered by a hiker. I listened in shock as the announcer described how his identity had been confirmed by the student ID card in his pocket.

Ryuusuke Yamazaki. Not only did that incompetent not bury the body, he even ignored my order to strip it. And on top of that, he left the student ID? How incompetent could one man be? If he had thought about it for half a second, he'd realize just how problematic that was! Even if dumping a body was a crime, just how overactive was this guy's sense of danger?

"Shuu! You look awful, what happened?"

My mother shouted in a shrill soprano. As always, her voice rattled around in my head.

Frantically controlling my breathing, I spoke with feigned composure.

"It's nothing to worry about, Mother. ...I'll be heading to school now."

But my voice was trembling. Just as my mother had pointed out, my face was

white as a sheet.

“Don’t be ridiculous! With you looking like that, there’s no way there’s nothing wrong!”

In reality, I was fighting back fury. Fear and anxiety were secondary. Contempt. Hatred. Resentment. Such emotions were the cause of my trembling.

All that filth can do is weigh down the excellent, it seemed. Far beyond being useless, they were hindrances. Their very existence soiled the earth.

“Shuu... You’re staying home today.”

Upon seeing my abnormal condition, my mother, who would normally insist I go to school even if I had a fever, commanded me. While this was odd in and of itself, it was surpassed by the suspicion I would no doubt arise if I didn’t attend school today.

I took a deep breath to settle myself.

Visions of that defunct factory invaded my mind. Ever since I stabbed Masato Yahara, I couldn’t break my mind free of that place. It was like it was binding my soul against my will. Why should I, who acted in accordance with justice, have to go through all this?

Suddenly, my mind was plunged into black and white and I was assailed with pain deep within my eyes. Black and white particles crawled along my skin and penetrated my pores, filling me with an itching sensation as they violated me.

Ahh, back at that factory there was a press I couldn’t figure out the purpose of. What was it capable of crushing? What was it capable of crushing?

What did it want to crush?

A gigantic press. A press to thoroughly crush them. A press to thoroughly crush their eyeballs and their bones and their nails and their organs and their genitals and their blood into pulp. We could collect up that formless meat with bulldozers. Splat, splat, splat. We could intentionally do it loudly. The noise is pleasantly obscene, after all. Splat, splat, splat. We could envision their soundless screams as we gleefully make meatballs from their meat. Perhaps the

meatballs would be black, or red, or pink. It would be cannibalism. We would force-feed them the meatballs. While crying, they would break out into a mad dance at how delicious they were. They're delicious, aren't they? All squishy and sticky and squishy. While making vulgar noises, they would feast. While descending into madness, they would feast. Once they realized what the meatballs were made of, they wouldn't even wait for the press before consuming their comrades. They would be so tasty they wouldn't be able to help themselves. They would be unable to help themselves when faced with their desires. They would be eaten alive. They would scream in pain. Nobody would save them. People like them have no empathy, so they can't comprehend the pain of others. I would laugh as I gazed out upon them. Meatballs. In the end, you filth were nothing but meatballs. Just like the giant meatball there, you all are nothing but bundles of meat. Bundles without souls. The final survivor of the cannibalism would cry out. Where are the delicious meatballs? He would ask me. Please bring me more! Please bring me more meatballs! He would entreat me. And I would point to where the meatball was. And he would eat the meatball I was pointing at. He would eat it with great relish. He would eat with delight, he would eat with madness. He would eat his own meat. He would eat himself. I would clutch my stomach and laugh. Indeed. All you people do is consume yourselves. I would point that out out of kindness. I would point out what kind of beings you are.

"Shuu!"

My mother's shout brought me back from my world of delusions.

"It looks like you're right, I'd better stay home today..."

After whispering that, I tottered back to my room. I couldn't walk straight. And as if I had released too much energy in that last vision, I couldn't think straight either.

As I layed on my bed, I took deep breaths to settle down my heart. But the electrical signals in my brain were going haywire, and I was so itchy I practically scratched my head off.

I couldn't settle down. The grotesque images wouldn't stop.

A thousand knives. A shower of blood. Flesh warped like clay.

I shook my head to try to drive out the delusions. If my mind went blank, they would get inside me!

—Get inside me?

Wouldn't that imply that they weren't my thoughts in the first place?

I could sense it myself. The fact that these thoughts were both dangerous and abnormal. That they were undesirable. So why wouldn't they stop?

I didn't know. I myself didn't know.

"Heh heh heh..."

Suddenly, I could hear laughter. Contemptuous, disparaging laughter.

"Man, how defective are you? You *don't know*?"

Leaping out of my bed, I scanned the room.

I was at a loss for words.

Where was I? What was going on?

It felt like I was standing atop the heart of a tremendous beast. Everywhere I looked was reddish-brown and pulsing. Magma that smelled of blood was spurting. It smelled like something was decomposing, too. The air was filled with refuse, making it impossible to see clearly. Something important to the world was clearly stagnating.

Ahh, it was so unsightly it make me sick.

And yet something strangely excited me. My breath grew wild, and I wanted to leap in the air.

I see, this must be that factory. Is this real? Is this a delusion? I don't know. The boundary between the two seemed vague.

"You've done yourself a pretty good job of crushing us, I see."

Masato Yahara stood in front of me. His entrance was abrupt, but to me it seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

"I crushed you. Certainly, I did crush you. But what of it? All of this is simply a

delusion.”

“A delusion, huh? Quite the fucked-up delusion you cooked up there. Weren’t you supposed to be all upright and clean handed and shit?”

Yahara’s face contorted into a sneer.

“...Shut your mouth, meat-man. If this is the world of my delusions, everything should go according to my whim. I’ll simply crush you into delicious meatballs.”

“Heh... Just fuckin’ try, I dare you.”

He put up no resistance, and I dropped the massive press on him. Splat! The sound of something soft being crushed rang out, and the vicinity was painted red. It was over too soon.

My being crushed was over too soon.

“Why?”

There was no consistency or anything in my mental image. Yet I ended up being crushed. Despite no longer having vocal cords, I whispered “why?” one more time.

“It’s one fucked-up delusion, right?”

Why, even though it was a delusion, had it come to such a grotesque end? Why was Masato Yahara standing there as if it were natural?

“It can’t be...!”

I finally understood the meaning of Yahara’s words.

“You got the feeling that you were being violated a minute ago, right? It’s simple. I don’t have a body, so it’s easy as hell for me to get inside you.”

Yahara’s discontent sneer didn’t fade.

“This ain’t your delusion. Your thoughts ain’t your own. You ain’t even yourself any more.”

I was no more than a piece of meat now, and he trampled me underfoot.

“I’m in control of this world now.”

I opened my eyes. I felt awful. I had an unpleasant dream, but I couldn't remember what it was about.

Why was it, I wondered? I was certain the dream had been unpleasant, yet I felt oddly refreshed. It was like the exhilarating sensation you got after overcoming a nasty fever. But it was clear to me that I had lost something in exchange for that exhilaration. I had lost it entirely. And I could never get it back.

But that was fine. I had been freed from a needless attachment. People were creatures that feared change, but that reaction was no more than an unthinking dismissal.

My strict adherence to ethics vanished.

Ahh... it welcomes me.

It was opening in front of me—

—a new world.

Perhaps that odd dream was a gift from God? From then on, everything I did went perfectly. Solving problem sets, my reading comprehension, advancing projects I was working on, everything was going brilliantly. My ability to concentrate was clearly improving as well. Not letting it get mixed in with the noise, nor getting distracted, I could immerse myself in a single task.

It was like I finally had my priorities all in order. It wasn't anything conscious. But it felt like I had built a solid set of unconscious rules.

It was after school. The classroom was illuminated by the setting sun, making my classmates' shadows stand out. But I could no longer make their faces out from each other. My mind shirked its duties, deciding that this point was of little importance.

Amongst them, one person's face remained clear.

I had to verify his character.

“Hiiragi, I have something I would like to ask you. Could I have a moment of your time?”

Kouta Hiiragi. As far as I knew, he was Masato Yahara’s one and only friend.

From his appearance he was the epitome of normality, far removed from the kind of person I was obligated to eliminate. But his closeness to Yahara merited caution.

“When he was still with us, would it be correct to say that you were the one who with the closest with Yahara?”

I began probing him. If he was of the same breed as Yahara, it naturally fell upon me to cull him.

“I wonder, was it true that Yahara was involved in some rather unwholesome affairs? Well...I refer to affairs in the broad sense, by the way. Perhaps that alone makes it not unusual he was involved in this incident. There were various things published about him in those periodicals, weren’t there? Were you completely unaware of all that?”

“I knew about the stimulants. But he never mentioned anything about any gangs or prostitution rings or anything. He didn’t show any signs of being involved with them, either. I’m pretty sure that’s all just misinformation.”

“Perhaps you weren’t close enough to Yahara to involve you in things like that? Are you saying that he never to bring you into his group of delinquent companions?”

“Pretty much. He didn’t involve me in sketchy stuff like that. He never even ate lunch with me, let alone tried to get me to smoke or anything. If we were around each other we’d chat, if the timing worked out we’d walk home together. But he definitely never tried to coerce me, and he never invited me anywhere. That was about the extent of our relationship. I’m sure that if I ever stopped wanting to spend time around him and started avoiding him, he wouldn’t have so much as spoken to me.”

I scrutinized his words, but other than the fact that he had kept silent about the stimulants nothing he was saying seemed particularly problematic. However, there remained the possibility that he was playing dumb so as not to fall under suspicion.

Furthermore, the fact that had adored Yahara was clear.

My initial conclusion was that there was no need to prioritize marking him. Something along those lines.

“So, why do you ask?”

A phrase floated to the front of my mind.

It would not be so strange for you to be killed as well.

He might be evil enough to warrant elimination.

Indeed, it was imperative that I identify those people that warranted elimination. That was the decree I had been given upon killing Masato Yahara and evolving past the ordinary.

But putting that to words would be problematic. Although I had utmost faith in my sense of justice, I was under no pretenses that the rest of the world would accept it so readily. Long ago, Galileo was put to trial for his advocacy of the heliocentric model.

“I suspect that the reason that Yahara was killed was the fact that he was sticking his hand in dangerous places. Following that reasoning, I felt it was possible that you, as his friend, might be in danger of meeting a similar fate. Am I mistaken?”

It was possible he would misconstrue my reply, so I followed up with my true feelings.

“In fact, I was thinking—that it would not be so strange for you to be killed as well.”

Hiiragi wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, so I thought it unlikely that he would pick up on my true goal.

But contrary to my expectations, Hiiragi reacted to my words.

“...What makes you space out so?”

“I, I’m not-”

Perhaps he was more clever than I gave him credit for? Was he simply assuming a facade of mediocrity? Had he been hiding the fact that he was of the same breed as Yahara, that he was a person that I needed to eliminate?

It seemed that my guard had been too lax a moment ago.

In any case, it would be best to end this conversation peacefully, in order to keep up appearances. But the moment I thought to make preparations to depart, something unthinkable happened.

“Oy, is Akiyama around?”

That incompetent loudly called out for me.

You have to be joking. After all the warnings I gave him about avoiding been seen together, for him to brazenly show up like this... My opinion of him as incompetent remained unrevised.

But I couldn’t simply ignore him. Leaving Hiiragi with some empty words, I headed to Yamazaki.

Saying that he wanted to go somewhere away from others, Yamazaki lead me to the audiovisual room. Normally the door would be locked, but Yamazaki threaded a wire into the keyhole and the door opened in no time. The long desk was already adorned with open snack wrappers and empty bottles, so I conjectured that Yamazaki and his compatriots made frequent use of the room.

Standing in front of a large projector, Yamazaki spread his hands like a politician giving a speech.

“Let’s chat about my circumstances a bit. My mom and I live alone. She got tricked by some jackass who ghosted her, and had me when she was just seventeen. Around that time, her folks, meaning my gram and gramps, cut ties with her, so she had to raise me all by her lonesome. She’s running fuckin’ ragged, man, she mans a register at a supermarket in the afternoon and has to

work a nightclub in the evenings. I just wanna treat her, you feel me? Like, I wanna take her out for barbeque or somethin'. That's where I'm comin' from."

A story the world could do without hearing.

"Would you mind if I helped you cut to the chase? To put it plainly, you're looking for more money, correct?"

"Damn, you catch on quick! That's our favorite class rep for ya'!"

I could tell from his reaction to seeing the corpse that he would eventually try to extort more money out of me. Here it was.

Of course, I had no money left. The million I had already given him was my entire net worth, the result of years of scrimping and saving.

"Yamazaki-senpai. I do not have any more money."

"Oh?"

"And although it pains me to point out the failures of another, the body was discovered because you failed to follow my instructions and bury it properly. While we both have our dissatisfactions, shall we simply call it good at that?"

"The fuck? You got any damn proof I didn't bury it right? Who knows, maybe some wild animals dug it up or somethin'? And besides, there's no need to get your panties in a bunch. If they can't figure out where the guy was offed, there's no way in hell they could pin it on you."

Had this man never heard of crisis management?

"Well, I guess if I hadn't transported it for ya they'd have figured you out in a heartbeat. And now I gotta deal with all this guilt and shit. It's keeping me up at night, man. The fuck kinda person are you, tellin' me to go dump poor little Maa in the mountains. Fuck, now I feel like turnin' myself in."

"Senpai, we would both be in a deal of trouble if the truth of the incident came out. Dumping a body is a serious crime, you know."

Yamazaki laughed mockingly.

"Don't make me fuckin' laugh. Yeah, I'd be in some trouble. But who gives a shit about that. But you absolutely can't let the truth get out. That's the only

thing you can afford to give a shit about. Even if it's the tiniest fuckin' chance, you can't ignore it."

Apparently his cunning was the only thing this man was good for. As he surmised, my previous words had been a hollow threat. It was like telling a man holding you at gunpoint that he'd go to jail if he shot you. It went without saying who had the initiative.

"...How much do you want?"

"Another million, for now."

For now.

Those words stuck in my head, words that indicated that more demands would eventually be forthcoming.

"Do you really think a high schooler like myself could quickly come up with a sum like that?"

"You say some funny shit, man. The hell's that got to do with me?"

The bell rang. Yamazaki smirked as he thumped me on the back.

"I'm countin' on ya, killer."

After saying that, he raised one hand and left the audiovisual room.

The sound of the door closing echoed throughout the room, cutting through the silence. The silence in the room felt like it was reproaching my own silence, so I forced my mouth open.

"Haha..."

My joy leaked out.

And when it did,

"Ahahahahahahahahaha!"

It was too funny.

"The hell does that have to do with him? The hell does that have to do with him indeed!"

Yamazaki hadn't doubted me in the slightest. He hadn't doubted that he was

on the side doing the taking. A million yen? There was no way I would pay such a sum. Yamazaki said some amusing things. I absolutely *couldn't* let the truth get out. That *was* the only thing I could afford to give a shit about.

Quite so.

Nothing, least of all money, has anything to do with a man who is about to die.

I had decided on it from the very beginning. When I couldn't find a noble individual to request transportation from, when I couldn't find an accomplice, I realized something.

As long as the transporter was also someone I could eliminate, I wouldn't have any problems.

Yamazaki, the finest scum known to man, was the last piece of evidence I needed to destroy. There would be nobody left who knew the truth.

But for him to mistake himself for being in a commanding position, oh, how precious I could laugh.

Ryuusuke Yamazaki.

You will fall into the hole I dug and die.

It's that factory. I was at that defunct factory again.

Just like last time, I exterminated him. I wielded a knife with the intent to kill him.

Not hesitating with the knife, he provoked me by stabbing at my heart. But that wasn't enough to cause me to draw back. I had resolved to kill him from the get-go.

I thrust back and stabbed him in the chest.

There was almost no resistance. But I could sense that it was the real thing. Human flesh was softer than I had expected, and it gave surprisingly little resistance.

I quietly drew the knife from Yahara. Blood spurted out. The blood got on my face, covering up my sight. The warm liquid was sticky and unpleasant.

Yahara's body toppled to the floor.

"You needed to be eliminated. The world would be better off before you committed a sin that could not be undone."

"Is that so?"

"What...?"

His wound should have been fatal, but he simply stood back up as if nothing had happened.

"What, you don't follow? I'm saying you ain't able to do stuff like that."

Although he was still dripping with blood, Yahara looked down on me.

"Just shut up and die already, damn you!"

I stabbed him again. Actually, unsatisfied by his flesh's give, I stabbed him over and over.

But Yahara just stood up again and again, laughing like a madman all the while. He seemed completely unfazed by his countless wounds.

"Quit messing with me... Why won't you die! Just die! Die! Die!"

Stab. Stab. Stab.

Rise. Rise. Rise.

"Why... why, goddamnit!"

No matter how many times I stabbed him, Yahara refused to die. He was vomiting blood, his bowels were hanging out, yet he just kept gazing at me with his protruding eye and sneering.

"You can't kill me. Not as long as you're alive, anyway. That's just how it works."

He spoke with his tongue hanging out and pointed at me.

I gazed down at myself in suspicion.

"Wh-!"

My body had been ripped to shreds. Similar to Yahara's... no, exactly like Yahara's.

"Why? Why is this happening to me! What did you do to me, Yahara?"

"Wait, I did something? Heh... I didn't do jack shit, man."

"Then... then what's going on? Why am I covered in wounds?"

"Well hot damn. You still don't know what's going on? Who's the one holding the knife here? Who's the one stabbing away? Who's the nutcase here?"

It went without saying, it was—

"Right, it's you. You're the one fucking yourself up."

Yahara caressed my cheek with a blood-soaked hand.

"C'mon, brother. If you wanna kill me, all you gotta go do is drag your sorry ass to the top of a cliff and take a dive."

Once I realized the meaning of his words, my dumbfounded face must have been quite the sight. Unable to hold it in, Yahara clutched his viscera-drenched stomach and gave a booming laugh.

"Ahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!"

He kept laughing.

"Ahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!"

Before I realized it, I was laughing too.

It was so funny I couldn't help but laugh.

It was the same thing, after all.

Yahara laughing and me laughing were the same thing, after all.

Our voices overlapped and joined into one. They were the same from the very start. There was no way Yahara, who didn't have a body, could laugh, which meant that I was simply laughing by myself.

If you put the two of us side-by-side in a mirror, we were reverses of each other. We were like opposites. But when looked at from the right angle, opposites were actually identical. It was like how hatred, the opposite of love,

was close enough to its counterpart that they could practically be called the same emotion.

Black and white assimilated with each other.

In recognizing that, I made it my strength.

I had affirmed who I was.

I found a suitable “stepping stone,” so I set my plan into action. It wasn’t something I had planned, but rather a stroke of good fortune. My mind was clear, and I wasn’t about to let a chance like that slip away from me. All that was left to do was fasten a rope to the roof and place Yamazaki atop the “stepping stone”.

Exalted at this favorable turn of events, I was beginning to make my way home when I spotted something that surpassed all my expectations.

I gasped reflexively.

Was that Kouta Hiiragi and Ririko Matsumi having a conversation?

Ririko Matsumi. One of the people I was cautious around. While she wasn’t exactly evil, she was an inorganic substance whose existence held no meaning. Because she was inorganic, she couldn’t interact with humans.

But even in the face of such an inorganic entity, Hiiragi was speaking to Ririko Matsumi as if they were old friends.

What exactly was going on here?

This wasn’t something I could simply overlook. I rushed over to Hiiragi and asked him about his relationship with Ririko Matsumi.

“I don’t know about close, but we’ve talked a few times.”

He’s talked with that inorganic substance “a few times”? How was that even possible?

An odd sense of unease washed over me. The fact that Hiiragi was abnormal in that regard was a conclusion I arrived at not from reason, but from instinct.

“Do have a habit of getting involved with people like her?”

Concealing my emotions, I dug deeper.

“‘People like her’?”

“Forgive my wording, but people with problems. Ririko Matsumi, Masato Yahara, and perhaps we should count Miki Kouzuki as well.”

“It’s not like I’m intentionally hanging out with weird people...”

“But you’re awfully close to a number of them. And you don’t seem to be particularly close to anyone else.”

“I mean, it’s true that I don’t have many close friends...”

“And you say that you don’t seek those kind of people out deliberately? If that’s the case, then perhaps you hold some sort of fascination from their perspective?”

Hiiragi was the kind of person who seemed harmless at a glance. His interactions with Masato Yahara initially put me on guard, but if it hadn’t been for that I likely wouldn’t inspected him at all.

But that was exactly why it was such a serious problem.

If it turned out that Hiiragi was truly a man who needed to be eliminated like Yahara or Yamazaki, then that meant that a problem individual was hiding within somebody I couldn’t currently get a read on. If that was the case, then that meant that the range of people I needed to kill was much wider than I thought. There would be no end to them.

How long would I have to carry this purge out for?

Suddenly, Hiiragi realized that I was looking at him with wide eyes. That wouldn’t do. My emotions were showing.

I exhaled and calmed my expression.

“I apologize. It would appear I’ve said some rather untoward things. Please forget I said any of that. I guess the incident has just made me a little high-strung.”

If I was simply high-strung, how high-strung should I be?

The first thing I needed to consider was why Hiiragi had gotten so close with

Yahara. There were as many detriments to being around him as there were stars in the sky. As a matter of fact, Hiiragi had earned the trepidation of his classmates, and had been unable to make any close friends since. And by spending time with a delinquent, he found himself in the teachers' bad books as well.

But in spite of all that, he had gotten close to Yahara. Such a thing would be unthinkable would proportionally large benefits.

Occam's razor would dictate that there was some manner of utility value in that relationship.

—Utility value. Was he was interested in the stimulants? Was he interesting in sleeping with women Yahara could provide him? No... a man with desires so base would have been outed as evil in an instant. The fact that he was not obviously evil was the problem.

What other benefits could there be, then? What could Masato Yahara even be used for, save stirring the flames of his homicidal urges in order to have him kill somebody? And nobody save a demon would wish for—

—wait, have him kill somebody?

Was that line of thinking truly so irrational as to be worthy of immediate rejection? At any rate, I myself was on the brink of being killed. That was the unwavering truth.

...What if, and this is only a hypothetical, what if it was possible to manipulate Yahara's actions?

I had to remember the scene I had just seen. Kouta Hiiragi was talking familiarly with the machine girl, Ririko Matsumi. He was even going out with the self-proclaimed magus Miki Kouzuki. Was it possible that the two of them had been teaching him ways to manipulate others? Was I leaping to conclusions? ...But even if it wasn't to that extent, the fact that Hiiragi's circumstances were peculiar was true beyond a doubt.

Indeed, something about Kouta Hiiragi was clearly making me uneasy. There was something about him that was different from other people.

"I'm worried about you, Hiiragi."

With those words, I tested Hiiragi. If he was the kind of person I needed to worry about, he might understand what I truly meant.

I prayed that Hiiragi would take my words normally. I didn't want to believe that there was a strain of evil in this world so wily that I couldn't immediately identify it.

But much to my regret, Hiiragi's face scrunched up at my words' disagreeable nature. He had clearly picked up on their implication.

"What do you mean by 'worried about'?"

Perhaps trying to trick me, he asked an innocent-sounding question.

"Hmm? I mean that I'm worried about you getting caught up in this incident, of course. What else might I mean?"

I considered Hiiragi's reactions up until this point. It seemed likely that he possessed powerful mind-reading abilities. There were too many things that didn't make sense otherwise.

Now, let's examine the facts once more.

Would it have been possible for Hiiragi to have been manipulating Yahara?

The answer was that it would. Given his level of mind-reading ability, it would be possible to anticipate how the other party would react to what you did and said. If you applied this knowledge, you could intentionally say and do things to influence the other party.

I wasn't sure as to what extent this ability could accomplish. But there was one thing I was sure of.

Kouta Hiiragi would have been capable of meddling with Masato Yahara's murder.

The motive was straightforward. When possessing that much power, it would be only human to want to test it. And it went without saying that manipulating a deviant like Yahara would be far more entertaining than manipulating an average person.

Hiiragi was putting his revulsion towards me on full display, so I asked him a question.

“What’s the matter?”

“...I have to get going.”

He left without answering, practically fleeing. He might have caught a glimpse at my thoughts just now.

I didn’t know the degree to which Hiiragi had influenced Yahara’s actions. But the conclusion was clear.

—The fact that I was almost killed was Hiiragi’s fault.

A difficult wrong to forgive.

A villain I needed to eliminate.

“...He’s next.”

After Ryuusuke Yamazaki, the next person I would eliminate was Kouta Hiiragi.

Now then, a decision becoming reality warrants but a short digression.

That night, Ryuusuke Yamazaki fell from the school roof and died.

He died because he had to die.

That’s all there was to it.

As I emotionlessly watched Yamazaki’s fall from the school parking lot, I considered how best to corner Kouta Hiiragi.

Kouta Hiiragi's Closed World (III)

According to Miki, the school has a barrier around it.

Apparently it's designed such that people that aren't related to the school just naturally avoid it. This applies equally both in the afternoon when students were there and at nights when they weren't. Although alumni, who had a built-in resistance to the barrier, could sneak in during the summer to set off fireworks, in general the more common sense a person had the less likely they were to enter the school.

So it made sense that there wouldn't have been any witnesses when Ryuusuke Yamazaki fell to his death.

The police didn't find anything resembling a note or a will, so it was determined that the likelihood that it was a suicide was low. It didn't look like it had been caused intentionally either, so it was essentially being investigated as a accidental death. As evidence to support this theory, the fact that the old fencing had been removed so that it could be replaced was brought up, as this meant that it was easy for an accident to occur.

How half-assed. I'd like to hear one respectable reason for someone to visit the Building One roof late at night, and an explanation for what exactly he was trying to do when he took his spill. I didn't want to just fall back on the explanation that it was just possible because he was a delinquent.

No matter what the police said, he had been murdered. And by the same guy who killed Masato, no less.

I was sure of it, despite lacking a shred of evidence. Any other possibilities were unthinkable.

Was I delusional? And even if I was, was there anything wrong with that?

After being closed for a week, the school reopened. The day the school

opened, yesterday, it seemed that everyone was spouting unfounded rumors regarding Yamazaki's death, but by today his death had more or less faded as a topic of discussion. It had faded from people's interest fast than the latest celebrity scandal.

It was just like what happened with Masato. Because he was perceived as a delinquent who didn't involve himself with them, they didn't have any stake in his death.

If you turned on your phone, social networking sites would let you instantly get in touch with huge numbers of people. Between a person you'd never met but had exchanged messages with on the daily and a delinquent who went to the same school as you but you'd never talked to, who were you closer to? In order to survive in our increasingly connected society, the art of apathy was a necessary one. Treating Masato and Yamazaki as the "other" was comparatively straightforward. Online or in real life, if somebody was annoying you you could just block them.

The classroom grew lively as the school day came to a close. As I silently cleaned the floor, Miki's face greeted me from the window facing the hallway. Ever since that day, she had never done up her hair, instead leaving it hanging down.

"See you later, Kouta."

Saying only that, she left without waiting for me like before.

Since the day she had kissed me, our relationship had changed. We hadn't walked home or eaten lunch together once since then.

It wasn't like we had formally broken up or anything. Our relationship up until now had simply been an unnatural creation of Miki's. The amount of distance between us now was entirely appropriate.

I finished my cleaning and made for home.

How best to proceed from here? Naturally I wanted to find out who killed Masato, but what could a layman like myself hope to accomplish?

Once I reached the front gate, I was greeted by something of a crowd. Were the news crews here again? Even people who weren't part of the throng were

sneaking glances as they passed by. Not wanting to be left out, I stopped to look as well.

Cowering in the middle was not a news crew but a girl from another school with an agonized look on her face. It appeared that the onlookers were at a loss for what to do, and as to whether or not they should help her.

“...Huh.”

Wasn't that the girl who had been asking around about Masato the other day?

On account of her hearing my unintentional remark, her eyes met mine. Her face was deathly pale, and when she saw who I was, her eyes grew wide in surprise. As a result, the crowd's attention turned to me.

“Kouta... Hiiragi, right?”

Although I was confused that she knew my name, I nodded.

“The Kouta Hiiragi who knew Masato Yahara?”

Sitting perpendicular from each other, the two of us were the only ones in the old-fashioned coffee shop aside from a single old man puffing away at a cigarette. Increasing feeling out of place, I observed the girl as I sipped at my water.

Apparently the reason she had been squatting earlier was because she had been assailed by a sudden bout of vertigo. Although she looked to be over it now, she was still trembling nervously.

“Um... my name is Shiho Sudou.”

Her name was unfamiliar.

“This is the first time we've met, right? Why do you know mine?”

“That's—”

For some reason she looked away guiltily before going on. “Your name came up because I was gathering information on Masato Yahara.”

Her words seemed strained, but I didn't think she was lying.

“I came looking for you because I thought you might know about him, being his friend and all.”

“Even though you’re in such bad shape?”

“...I’m sorry. I haven’t been feeling well lately, and I keep getting these dizzy spells.”

“So basically, in spite of your condition, you want to find out about Masato?”

Sudou quietly nodded.

“Why do you wanna know so bad?”

“...The murder happened pretty near me, so I kind of got caught up in my curiosity—”

“That’s a lie.”

There’s no way I would fall for such a transparent lie.

“You’re too frantic to chalk it up to mere curiosity, Sudou. You definitely have a more serious reason for wanting to know about him.”

At my rebuttal, Sudou paled again.

I then realized something. What if she knew something about Masato’s death? Was that why she was so invested in the incident?

“Could you keep what I’m about to tell you a secret? Actually, I was talking to him just before his estimated time of death. It was a Friday, the 26th. And, um... we actually weren’t just chatting, I was hanging out with him.”

“What? If you were hanging out with him, does that mean you were a friend of his?”

Sudou shook her head.

“I... well... Masato Yahara kind of... picked me up or something along those lines, and we were messing around. That was the first time I had met him. Um, I normally don’t do stuff like that! But I kind of had a lot going on that day, so...”

I didn’t care about her excuses. But her testimony was important.

The last time anyone had seen Masato was supposedly on May 25th, when he

had threatened to kill a female company worker. Sudou had met him the day after that. And if they had been hanging out, it was unlikely that she was mistaken.

“But I didn’t want it to get out that he picked me up and we were messing around, so... I couldn’t tell anyone. But the fact that he was killed after we split up... When I think about it like that, I just can’t get it out of my head... I have to find out what happened... I feel like I have to find out what happened...!”

It seemed that she too was obsessed with Masato.

The reason she was willing to go so far was because she was spurred on by doubts as to whether the truth of the incident would ever come out. It was like the killer had forcibly stolen a piece of herself. As long as the incident remained unresolved, she could never reclaim it, which was why she was prowling around like a zombie.

“I’ll help you as much as I can. But I’ll need to ask you a couple things in return. On that day, did anything about Masato seem off to you? Did he give off any signs that he was going to get involved in this incident?”

“...No.”

“Cut the lies.”

“Eek!”

I replied instantly, and she froze in fear. For a moment she simply pressed her lips together and trembled, but at my continued gaze she eventually gave up on her silence. She faltered, but spoke nonetheless.

“...Actually, right before Masato Yahara and I split up, we ran into an acquaintance of his. From what they were talking about, I think they were classmates. He was skinny and about average height, and he was wearing glasses.”

“So just like you, he saw Masato after that lady that testified did, right?”

“...I suppose so.”

Then why didn’t he come forward as a witness? Did he also have personal circumstances involved, like Sudou did?

“What was his name?”

“...I don’t know.”

Her reply was clearly evasive.

“What kind of mood did you get from their conversation?”

“...They didn’t seem to get along. It felt kind of like they both held the other in contempt or something...”

Masato would have acted like that towards anyone. That half wasn’t useful.

But as for the other party...?

“Wait, the person Masato was talking to also acted like they held Masato in contempt? He was actively antagonistic to *Masato*?”

“Well... that’s what it looked like to me, at least.”

Sudou had said that the spectacled man was probably a classmate of Masato’s. Even if she was mistaken about that, at the very least that meant that he was an acquaintance of Masato’s of about the same age.

If that was the case, then their behavior was abnormal. Most would instinctively flinch at the dangerous atmosphere Masato gave off.

“What kind of impression did the bespectacled guy give off?”

“Well... He seemed smart, and really diligent. But he was also a little bit creepy.”

“Diligent, and creepy?”

Normally people didn’t give off both of those impressions at once.

“In what way? For example, did he seem like he was looking down on others?”

“Yeah... He kind of gave off that impression. But that wasn’t what caught my attention... Um, he was saying some really respectable things. He was giving this really sound reasoning with a straight face. I don’t know if I’d say that I found it strange... or that it was annoying... he kind of just gave off this odd unpleasant vibe. Oh... I’m coming across as weird, aren’t I?”

“Don’t worry, you’re not.”

I thought it odd that a guy our age would be casually spouting “sound reasoning”. Most adults have little sympathy for stout-hearted public statements. When faced with sophistry that the speaker themselves doesn’t believe, the default response is generally backlash. And high schoolers despise such shallow adults despite feeling themselves become more and more like them.

Although adults have no choice in the matter, anyone our age who would willfully voice such reasoning must be somewhat distorted.

Ah, yes — *the distortion called an honors student*.

“Did that person... speak really formally?^[14]”

Ahh.

The image of a certain man springs to mind.

“Really formally? Um, I think so, probably...”

I knew that I was jumping to conclusions. But the answer I had arrived at stuck in my brain like a piece of gum that had been run over by countless cars.

The answer.

—Shuuichi Akiyama killed Masato Yahara.

—Shuuichi Akiyama killed Masato Yahara.

—Shuuichi Akiyama killed Masato Yahara.

That infinitely-repeating thought resounded in my mind, creating a fissure in my head when I could bear it no longer. Something that felt like it was boiling flowed out, bubbling with heat and viscous to the touch.

“—aaAAAA!”

Flickering. Lights. Flickering. Lights. It broke. My lines of sight crossed and split the world in two. Flickering. “I’ll kill you.” A red stain that expanded without limit. Or perhaps it was ultramarine. A hue stained in nothing but black. The ultramarine expanded. The despair expanded.

For some reason, something metallic was twining around my body. It clicked

and clacked as it pressed down painfully on my body. But more than painful, it was unpleasant. Click clack, clickity clackity.

“—Kou, can you hear me?”

Yeah.

“I^[15]” could hear him.

I wouldn't ever forget him.

“Are you alright? D...did something happen?”

I returned to my senses.

Sudou was gazing at me with a little bit of worry and a lot of discomfort in her eyes.

“It's nothing.”

Somehow stuffing “that” back into my head, I turned my focus to the person in front of me.

“More importantly, why didn't you tell anyone about the bespectacled guy? You had to have had a reason, right?”

Even though she had said so much already, she seemed to be taken by an odd hesitation. She was hiding something from me.

“I... I was scared... I saw him.”

“Start from your main point.”

“Ah, I'm sorry... You just seemed kind of scary there for a moment... Another person from your school died the other day, right? A guy named Yamazaki. It turns out, I was actually at your school the night he died.”

“At the school? Even if you went to the school late at night, you wouldn't expect to find any clues, would you?”

“Umm, I wanted to check out Masato Yahara's seat and belongings and stuff. But that's not important... What I'm trying to say is, the bespectacled guy was at your school that night.”

The bespectacled guy — Shuuichi Akiyama was at the school the night Yamazaki was killed?

And although I wouldn't have thought the two to have any common ground, I myself saw Yamazaki call Akiyama over for some reason.

"You didn't see the moment he pushed him off or anything, did you?"

"Of course not... You see, the thing I'm worried about is that the bespectacled guy might have seen me. After all, he never testified to the police about Masato's death or about that Yamazaki guy's death! Doesn't that basically mean that..."

"I see. So you're saying that the bespectacled guy was involved in both incidents. And if he is the killer, you're worried that he might come after you to seal your lips, given that you were a witness to both of them."

Sudou nodded rapidly.

"What should I do... What should I do..."

Sudou, whose complexion still hadn't improved, scratched at her head.

Her best option at this point would be to simply forget about Masato and not get any more involved than she already was. But that would be inconvenient for me, so I kept my mouth shut.

After all — *if I used her correctly, I could definitely get to the bottom of all this.*

"I actually have a hunch as to who the bespectacled guy is. Maybe I should go ask him why he was on the roof when Yamazaki died."

"Ah, wait a second! That's not right!"

"Not right? What isn't?"

"When this Yamazaki fell, he wasn't on the roof. He was in a parking lot near the campus."

We left the coffee shop and headed back to the school to check out the parking lot she had seen the bespectacled guy at.

Sudou's face was so white that it looked like her blood had just straight-up

forgotten that it was supposed to flow, but I pretended not to notice and continued listening to her.

Back when Sudou had been trespassing on the school, she had heard someone shout “Gyah!” at pretty much the same time she spotted the bespectacled guy in the parking lot. Despite her misgivings, she headed towards the location of the scream and found Yamazaki’s corpse with its head split open. Baffled and terrified, she fled the scene without calling for help. Due to having her hands full with fleeing, she didn’t have time to look for the bespectacled guy again.

That was her testimony.

“What kind of scream did it seem like?”

“Huh? Um... a normal scream, I guess.”

Unable to contain my irritation, I followed up. “What do you mean by normal?”

“Well... normal is like... they were scared, so they raised their voice, you know? I don’t remember anything too specific, really. I was pretty frantic.”

She wasn’t going to be of much use. Based on the texture of the scream, it would have been possible to discern if it was an accident or a murder.

But if he was screaming, it probably wasn’t suicide.

“I guess the bespectacled guy might not be the killer after all... I mean, you can’t really make somebody fall from where he was.”

This parking lot was indeed quite far from the Building One roof, where Yamazaki had fallen from. But there was a clear view of that roof here, and although the lights were unreliable they would indeed have let you see the fall from here.

“If our bespectacled friend isn’t the killer, why didn’t he give his eyewitness account? Unless he ran away in fear like you did, it would make sense for him to report it.”

“Maybe he just didn’t notice the scream? Like, if he was deep in thought or something.”

Well, that example aside it was conceivable that there were some circumstances that kept him from noticing. Assuming that he was related to the incident just because he was at the school was too simplistic.

But the killer was Shuuichi Akiyama.

I had already decided that.

Was there a way to make somebody fall while you were down here? In mysteries, you sometimes saw timed traps that used ice, but... no, if the method was timed, there wouldn't have been any reason for him to come all the way out to this parking lot. If he was at home with his family, it would make for a better alibi.

So there must have been some reason why Akiyama had to be here.

"I guess it really is impossible... Which means that he won't really come after me..."

As I remained silent, Sudou spoke as if to reassure herself.

I tried to put up with it out of sympathy for the fact that she had gotten involved in a murder case, but I was at my limit. She was getting under my skin. Her insecurity and indecisive personality played a large role in that, but they weren't the only things about her that made me uncomfortable.

"...Sudou. Would you mind if I took some of your time tomorrow?"

"Hm? Why? I...I don't really have any more reason to spend time with you..."

"You want to know the whole story about Masato's murder, don't you?"

"O...of course..."

She gave a cautious affirmation.

I grinned and responded.

"If you come again tomorrow, I'll explain everything."

Sudou's eyes went wide. There was no doubt that she was possessed by Masato. If I phrased it like that, no matter how fishy she thought it sounded she would be unable to refuse.

Now then, the sacrifice was secured.

I had a pretty good handle on the answer. I wasn't the protagonist of a detective novel, nor was I a policeman who needed evidence before he could issue an arrest. I had no interest in elegant tricks, and I had no need for proof.

But even so, I knew the truth. With the materials I had, I could use this "apparatus" to find out the truth whenever I wanted.

Anyways.

My objective had never been to find the truth anyways.

After promising to meet tomorrow and parting ways with Sudou, I headed for home. In the shutter town where I had last spoken with Masato, signs of uniformed students had all but vanished. In fact, despite the time there were no passersby whatsoever. It was like a ghost town. I stood still under the flickering, near-dead street lights, and the air around me swarmed with bugs.

—Ahh, I could finally reach it.

An ominous sense of exaltation bubbled up within me. I could feel a painful burning sensation deep within my eyes. My heart was pulsing violently, as if I had just ran with all my strength. An impetus. Right now, I was being assailed by some manner of impetus. Had I always had this inside me?

That impetus became like a large wall closing in on me. After being thoroughly crushed and scattered to the winds, I sought a means of reformation. I faced the impetus and became one with it.

I wanted to escape. I wanted to get out. Unable to bear it any more, I began running. Ignoring all the red lights, I ran. The impetus resembled lust, and I lost my ability to ignore it. Cracks formed all along my body, I shattered, and it leaked out.

The world turned on its head. Everything was upside down.

Impetus. IMPETUS. I-M-P-E-T-U-S. Guns were built to shoot people, simply waiting for a reason to have their triggers pulled. Waiting and waiting for their moment to burst into action, intoxicating us with their sweet temptations.

When? When was it that this impetus took root within me?

Where did it come from?

“Huff...huff...”

Having been running for no reason, the pain in my feet and my labored breathing caused me to stop once more. Because I stopped, it caught up. My impetus caught up with me.

When it did, I could hear it.

I could hear it. I could hear the sound of metal. Where was it ringing from? It sounded like it was coming from everywhere in the world. It was the first time I had heard it, yet the sound was strangely nostalgic.

The sound that had always bound me. The sound that had always bound Masato Yahara.

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

The sound — resembled that of chains.

People don't need reasons to continue liking or disliking things. Once you're attached to something, you don't just keep liking it, your affection often ends up growing.

I couldn't stop hating Shuuichi Akiyama. His looks, his tone of voice, his personality, I interpreted everything about him in the least favorable way, distorting my perception.

I, who was supposed to be ambivalent towards all other people, learned something for the first time.

This was what it meant to hate someone.

“Hiiragi.”

So when he called out to me during the break after first period, I wanted to let out a groan. He seemed to talking to me an awful lot lately.

Although I let my resentment show on my face, Akiyama paid it no need.

“I apologize for bothering so many times, but I had another question relating to Yahara that I wanted to ask you.”

That was fundamentally the only business Akiyama had with me. Although recently, it seemed like he was merely using it as a pretext to measure something about me.

“This line of inquiry may seem a little peculiar, but please bear with me. Hiiragi, have you ever felt that you were being manipulated?”

I wasn’t sure what he was asking about, and I wasn’t sure why he was asking it.

Akiyama was putting on an air of nonchalance, but something deep within his eyes was burning dimly, refusing to overlook any slight change in my emotions.

“Let me put a little more straightforwardly. Hmm... Let’s suppose that across a person’s life, there are several junctures where crucial choices are laid out for them. Of course, their choice is left to their own will. But even if they don’t perceive it immediately, they will always be left with a nagging doubt. Was that truly my own will? Or was I simply induced to choose what I did?”

“...I’m not quite sure what you’re getting at.”

“For instance, choosing which high school entrance exams to take. Although you are of course the one who makes the final decision, your family, your friends, and your middle school teachers all influence that decision as well. There’s no way to tell the extent to which your true desires were reflected in your decision. You could say that, to a certain extent, the influence of your surroundings lead you to whatever school you ended up attending. And the number of times in a person’s life where their decisions are influenced by others in this manner are countless.”

“Would you mind putting it a little more simply?”

“No problem. Have you considered that Yahara’s actions may have been brought about by a third party’s intervention? The circumstances are of course complicated, but it is possible that somebody exerted a great deal of influence over him. If that influence was wielded intentionally, he could very well be said to have been manipulated.”

“...What exactly are you saying?”

To my disgust, Akiyama was no longer making any effort to conceal his observation and was staring straight at me. It was unsettling.

“What I’m trying to say is this. There is a real possibility that Yahara’s death was brought about as a result of somebody’s manipulation.”

“Almost like magic, huh.”

Akiyama didn’t notice my sarcasm.

“I agree. But upon thinking it over again, something else caught my attention. In the days before he died, Yahara hadn’t been attending school, correct? He wasn’t emotionally stable. In that unstable state, it would have been relatively easy to induce him to take certain actions. At worst, if the person manipulating him was somebody close to him they made have even taken steps to create that instability. Of course, no normal person would be capable of such a thing. But for someone specialized in manipulation, such a thing might not be unthinkable.”

—Wait, what did he just say?

If anyone but Akiyama had said it, I could have written it off. But because it was none other than Akiyama, there was no way I could let that sentence slide.

He wasn’t emotionally stable.

That might be speculation due to Masato’s absence from school. But it wasn’t. The certainty in his words could only be the result of firsthand experience.

Ahh, I was certain of it. Akiyama had run into Masato after he’d stopped coming to school. I was certain that the bespectacled guy Sudou had been referring to was Akiyama.

But he was keeping silent about having seen Masato. He hadn’t breathed a word. And such an action couldn’t possibly mesh with an honors student’s sense of duty.

Which meant that he had to have a reason for doing so.

“Hiiragi, is something the matter? You appear to be trembling.”

Akiyama asked his question while concealing his animosity behind a mask of a smile. He acted as if my response was exactly in accordance with his expectations.

The two of us didn't mesh with each other. We stared at each other with distrustful eyes filled with naked hostility. Ahh... good grief, we truly are locked away in our closed worlds. We're looking at the same things, but interpreting them completely differently.

What's the next stage this man has prepared?

Who does he plan on killing next?

"Akiyama."

I suddenly recall a conversation I once had at a park in the dead of night. What pattern did he see in the moon?

Feels like there's a monster baring its fangs above me.

"Akiyama, what do you see when you look at the moon?"

Akiyama answered with a puzzled look on his face.

"At the moon? I see a rabbit pounding mochi, isn't that obvious?"

Of course. Akiyama could answer like that without a shred of doubt in his mind. Out of the infinite possible interpretations, he applied the one that hewed to common sense.

I responded without thinking.

"You make me fuckin' sick."

The same jeer someone else had used before.

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

I could no longer get that noise out of my ears.

Miki Kouzuki's Closed World (II)

After Kouta left, I simply laid on my bed in a daze for a while. The sun had long since set by the time I finally began moving again and turned to the mirror on my desk to put up my unfastened hair. But I couldn't will myself to do it. The red hair band I had used for so long felt like it contained half of my self — well, that was an exaggeration, but it definitely felt like it had been part of me. That was why it had been so steeped in my magic. Kouta wasn't the only one under its influence; it had also drained my desire to replace it.

I decided to give up on the ponytail and leave my hair like this for a while.

Collapsing onto my bed again, I ruminated on what Kouta had said to me.

I have to wonder, why do you spend so much time confirming my feelings without voicing your own even once?

His expression had been the same as always, and his voice had been gentle, but he had clearly been reproaching me. It was the first time he had done so.

He'll just come to hold you in contempt, and that'll be that. Later.

Yahara had been right after all.

I'm a magus.

That may not be the most accurate way to put it. But I do actually have a special power, and I call it magic.

Up until I turned ten, I never displayed any external emotions. I was extremely shy, never opening my heart up to anyone. By the time I was old enough to realize what was going on, my parents had fallen out of love and fought frequently enough that we even got complaints from the next neighborhood over. They began living separately when I was eight, and they got divorced when I was nine. I was an only child, so I didn't have any siblings that could intervene. Back then, the atmosphere in our family always felt like

someone had run a fine knife through it.

Although they were never physically abusive before the divorce, when my mother was in a bad mood she would often treat me like I wasn't there. Even if I cried, she wouldn't pay any attention to me. As this went on, I eventually stopped crying altogether, along with laughing. And I didn't just stop expressing emotions, I became numb and stopped feeling them altogether. My unnecessary functions were deteriorating.

As you would expect, none of my classmates wanted to get close to someone like that, so I was alone at school as well. I didn't talk to anyone at school, nor did I at home. That was how I spent my days.

It was like I was invisible. In Japanese class, I wrote poems along those lines as well. When I did, my homeroom teacher would give their unaffected impressions, usually something along the lines of "What an interesting perspective." ...Notice my cries for help already. Or had they noticed, but ignored them after deeming them too much of a bother?

Nobody came to my rescue. The only reason I was saved was because I didn't give up in spite of that. I longed for the warmth of others, I yearned for it, and that tenacity was what eventually saved me.

—If only I could use magic.

I always fantasized about that. If only I could use magic to get along with anyone and everyone. If I could use that kind of magic, my parents could get back together, and I could laugh along with my friends. Those were kinds of ridiculous delusions I entertained.

But then one day, magic suddenly stopped being a mere delusion.

Although I had no one to talk to, I was always enviously watching my classmates' interactions. Now that I look back at it, I was watching them with an aberrant level of concentration.

As an outsider, I calmly observed their interactions. I scanned the patterns of their conversations, unconsciously accumulating data.

And once I did, I began to understand the regularities therein. What kind of person what do what kinds of things to which other people, and how would

those people react? Ahh, sudden awakenings truly do happen. As if I had learned a new language, the way I saw the world shifted.

Having understood the regularities behind communication, I immediately put this knowledge to the test. It took courage to move forward, but my hundreds of simulations gave me confidence.

And the result was — people responded exactly as I expected.

It felt good beyond words.

I changed myself through force. My emotions were still weak, but that actually worked in my favor. If I didn't feel anything, then no matter what part I had to play it wouldn't adversely affect me. I was at a little bit of a loss as to what to use for my baseline personality, but I found being a cheerful airhead to be the most convenient so I eventually settled on that. I was also aware of my looks, and took full advantage of them. Personality isn't a single thing, it's incident to one's outwards appearance. This can be observed particularly strongly when guys are looking at girls. And the same manner of communication leaves a different impression on each recipient. There are words that can only be said and taboos that can only be broken in certain contexts. I steeled my intuition, put that theory into words, and changed it into something I could control.

Although my good cheer was initially an act, it eventually took root in my personality. In much the same way, my lost emotions initially felt like they were drifting gently in the air above me but eventually became the real thing.

My days became startingly resplendent, and I was replete.

In my greed, I desired even more bliss. I decided to use my powers not just to change myself, but to influence those around me as well.

In retrospect, I was basically cheating by using it against adolescent girls whose egos hadn't fully developed. My "communication" bordered on brainwashing.

Upon accepted my interference and my value system, it became easier for me to control someone. In middle school, I had a friend (or so she was perceived by those around us) named Youko who I knew so well I could basically control. She

became an entity dedicated to my convenience, as if she lived solely for my sake.

I refer to people like her as having taken on my attribute. By using the information under my control, I can even manipulate them subconsciously. If I recite an incantation, they'll go so far as to become my swords and shields.

That's why I call it magic.

But ever since that incident, my magic had been getting cloudier. The incident involving a ceremony I couldn't tell Kouta about.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, it was an experiment.

I met this girl — I don't know her name, so I'll call her A — over the internet. I knew from her profile that she was interested in magic, so I took action. After exchanging LINE IDs with A, we immediately hit it off and began chatting nearly every day.

I had already experienced someone taking on my attribute at school. The next step was to find out how much control I could exert over a person, how much magic I could use, that I had only ever interacted with online. That was how greedy I was when it came to interpersonal relationships.

But the experiment ended in failure.

I had planned on controlling her by introducing her to my value system and sharing my magical delusions with her. But because I couldn't meet her in person, small misalignments were born. My magic was imperfect.

One day, A invited me to a magical ceremony. While all this was going on, I was studying for high school entrance exams, and I declined her invitation because I had a test coming up. But perhaps the true reason I turned her down was because I sensed that her delusions were magnifying past the point of no return and becoming dangerous.

After conducting the ceremony on her own, something about A clearly seemed off. Her LINE messages became increasingly unintelligible, and when I expressed my confusion she became irritated, angry, disappointed, and

ultimately ended up blocking me. Her social media profiles became full of citations in a language only she understood.

Then she stopped updating her social media altogether.

Worried about her, I took the train three hours to visit the middle school she went to. There, I soon discovered what had happened to her.

A had killed herself.

For the first time. For the first time, I began having misgivings about my magic. I had been manipulating people so casually, but was that really something so permissible? Wasn't it wrong to change people like this? If I hadn't been around, wouldn't A still be alive?

Hesitations like that gradually chipped away at my magic. Magic became more powerful when you accepted it blindly, and weaker when you doubted it. No longer certain that I was in the right, I refrained from using magic and called myself a magus to anyone who would listen, only interacting with people who would approach me in spite of that.

But then I found out about Kouta Hiiragi.

He caught my attention from the moment I first laid eyes on him. As I watched him merge seamlessly into his environment, nearly transparent, I thought that he reminded me of mineral water.

Even if I was restraining myself from using magic, Kouta alone I couldn't overlook. He was simply in too much danger. I don't know how he looked to everyone else, but to me he looked like he was strolling down the streets of Johannesburg with rolls of banknotes pasted all over him.

I had to protect him!

I was overcome with a strong sense of duty. I willing to do whatever it took to protect him. It was so strong, I didn't even mind if I had to offer him my chastity.

But taking a step back now and reconsidering, why had I been so fervent?

Once I got my thoughts in order, the cause became clear. After driving A to her death, I had likely been trying to atone. And Kouta had been a suitable

individual. By saving Kouta, I could reaffirm both myself and my magic.

It was all for my own sake.

It was for my own ego.

I was well aware. I used my magic to manipulate others. But the one most strongly manipulated by magic was me. Even my personality had been created to suit magic's needs. My very emotions turned according to magic's convenience.

So I didn't know any more.

Where did my true feelings lie?

"See you later, Kouta."

I called out to Kouta from the hallway after school, then returned to my own classroom.

After I kissed Kouta, I couldn't figure out how close we were. It wasn't even clear whether or not we had broken up. I didn't know if it was okay to walk home together with him, either.

On the other hand, it also wasn't like he had completely cut off contact with me. No conclusion seemed forthcoming, and I put off reaching for one.

As someone who habitually made decisions quickly, this was a first for me.

"Say, Miki, did you by any chance break up with that guy from next door?"

Sayuri asked concernedly, wearing her trademark short skirt. I simply sat uncomfortably, which she mistook for an affirmation and pounded on my back.

"Well, I dunno who dumped who, but with your looks I'm sure you'll have plenty of much better guys pounding at your door!"

"I think Kouta's pretty good-looking, myself..."

That was my honest evaluation.

"Oh, no way. He's totally normal. Bland. No personality. Below-average. And

for him to break up with you so quickly, he must be a pretty shitty person. He's worse than trash. I mean, that background character doesn't even compare to someone like Makino."

"I don't even know Makino. And besides, Kouta and I didn't break up. I think... probably..."

I realized my mistake the moment the words left my mouth. I'd said something that the love story-crazed Sayuri would be sure to latch on to.

"What's up with you two!? Now you have to tell me everything! That's it, how about you tell your favorite love expert the details?"

I mean, as far as I knew she had only ever dated one person, and she was still a virgin... No, there was no need to bring that up. Sayuri was always center of attention in our class, so she needed to be perceived as experienced in the ways of love. I shouldn't say anything to shatter that image of hers.

I ended up attracting the interest of not just Sayuri, but most of the girls in class, so the whole matter took a good deal more time to resolve than I had expected. I was on edge because I didn't want any strange rumors spreading around, and by the end of it all I was dead tired.

By the time I passed through the school gate, the sun had already almost set.

I had been hanging my head in exhaustion my entire way out, so it was by sheer coincidence that I lifted my head when I did and saw what I saw.

Kouta was with a girl from another school.

The aging coffee shop they went to was near the school, but drinks there were expensive and it wasn't particularly stylish. Perhaps the conversations about romance I had been embroiled in were to blame for the fact that "affair" was the first word that sprung to my mind, and my face went bright pink.

But setting aside the prospect on affair, seeing the two of them side-by-side gave me an ominous premonition. And the girl was clearly being possessed by some manner of evil magic. It was hard to anything good coming of her interacting with Kouta as he was now.

But my legs simply trembled, refusing to take me to the coffee shop. No matter how much faith I had in my premonition, the courage to get involved refused to well forth.

Vexed at my own powerlessness, my eyes welled up with tears. What I really wanted to do was storm into that coffee shop this instant and protect Kouta from everything that might harm him.

What was so wrong about that?

The next day, Kouta had clearly undergone some manner of transformation.

Yahara was slowly corroding away at him. But a dead man's magic can't exert any new influence, so I hadn't been treating it as an emergency.

But I had been mistaken. Yahara's magic was stronger than I had imagined. And more importantly, its target had been Kouta, whose magic resistance was zero.

Kouta was completely submerged in the sorcery that was born from the ritual of his death.

What should I do? Kouta had already lost his confidence in me, so now that the issue had progressed this far it was difficult to imagine him listening to what I had to say. On the other hand, was it really for the best that I just leave him be? Would any actions I took to save him here simply be to fuel my own ego?

"You seem down again today, Miki. Probably have your head all full of that good-for-nothing guy Kouta, right?"

Sayuri's quip came in an intentionally-bright tone. When I met her eyes and gave a small nod, she sighed exaggeratedly.

"...Say. You haven't properly dumped him, and you haven't been properly dumped, am I right? ...And, um, as an aside, I find Kouta's worth as a guy to be deeply... deeply! Very deeply! Suspect! ...Suspect, but..."

She continued with a wry grin.

"If you like him so much, wouldn't it best if you tried really hard to make up with him?"

“Eh?”

Like him?

I liked Kouta?

“You know, I feel like I have a pretty good grasp on your whole situation-thing over there. Like, why things between you two keep getting so complicated. ...Say, Miki, you’ve never *liked* anyone before, right? This is just me guessing, but Kouta asked you out, and even though it was Kouta you didn’t hate the idea so you just kinda went along with it. Then, when he wanted to move the relationship along, your feelings still hadn’t caught up and you got all wishy-washy... and then he got all pissy, am I on the right track?”

I was impressed. There were a number of details she got wrong, but she had seen through to the essentials.

“You probably don’t understand your feelings yourself, huh, Miki. But see, using Makino as an example, you’ve rejected a bunch of guys before, right? But the only one you’ve gone out with is Kouta. That’s a pretty big jump, don’t you think? So I’m like, what if you just don’t know what it means to like someone?”

“...I don’t have any personal experience, but I think I have a pretty good idea from books and stuff. When you like someone, stuff like your chest getting tight, not being able to swallow when you’re eating, and being blind happen, right? But nothing like that’s happened to me. So I thought my feelings were something else...”

“Y’know, Miki, you’re really good at picking up on people’s true natures, right? Like, creepily good.”

I was startled at having that so suddenly pointed out. I didn’t think Sayuri had seen through me to that extent.

“Miki, the kind of *like* you’re talking about is probably just when you have illusions about the other party. Like, when you have an idealized version of someone in your head and you fall in love with that version. But when that happens, you’re not really looking at the real them. You’re just in love with the idea of being in love. But because you pick up on people’s true natures so easily, you don’t harbor illusions like that. I guess that makes you kind of a

realist?”

“Does that mean I can’t fall in love?”

The creation of my very personality and emotions had been manipulated by magic. It couldn’t be helped if such impediments arose.

But Sayuri just shook her head.

“No, no, no. That kind of love is no more than kid’s play. It’s an egotistical, conceited kind of love. Even a love expert like myself had a phase like that. But every dreamer has to graduate from loving the idea of being in love. That kind of violent love never lasts long. But I think that even without those violent emotions, if you’re always, always always, thinking about that someone, then that’s already love in and of itself.”

I understood the words coming out of her mouth, but I couldn’t make them feel real.

So basically, I was already in love with Kouta?

“That’s...”

“Actually, maybe it doesn’t have to be that complicated? Falling in love is something you can only do if you want to. You couldn’t do it because you weren’t prepared yet. Does that make sense?”

“I’m really not sure it does...”

Sayuri took on a voice like she was gently teaching a child who was doing poorly in school.

“Okay, then let’s stop thinking about it all jumbled-up like that. Let’s just confirm something. Miki, what is it that you want to do for him?”

“That’s—”

It immediately came to mind.

I wanted to make him happy. I wanted to protect him from evil magi.

“Do you think about anyone else in the same way? Could you do the same things for them?”

Kouta was the only person I so desperately wanted to save. But that was

because he was a special, transparent kind of person. It was because he didn't have any magic resistance. ...Or so I had thought.

"Just do what you want to. Even if you end up being a bit of a nuisance, you're cute enough that anyone would let you get away with it!"

"But..."

"No buts! Ahh, all this tedious blathering is so unlike you! Once the Miki I know has her mind set on something, she goes and does it! Where'd that assertiveness of your go?"

"T...that's..."

"Ahh, I can't hear you. Until Miki gets moving, I'm not talking to her anymore! That's it, I'm done! I'm done being friends with her!"

Sayuri really was meddlesome, I thought, as she pushed me forward repeatedly after arbitrarily deciding that I was in love. But thanks to her fervent speech, I was finally sure of my feelings.

—No matter what, I couldn't leave Kouta be like this!

That much I felt certain of. Whether or not it was my ego speaking, those were my true feelings.

Sorry, Kouta.

I can't ignore these feelings of mine. No matter what!

As soon as break rolled around, I immediately headed for the next-door classroom. I had nothing even resembling a plan, but my magic should still have some efficacy. If I just talked with him face-to-face, I was sure I could come up with a way to save him!

I surveyed the classroom, but Kouta was nowhere to be seen.

What should I do? Should I wait for him...? Or should I go back after all...?

"Kouzuki. May I have a moment?"

As I hesitated, a skinny man in glasses called out to me. Though his glasses hid them somewhat, dark shades stood in sharp contrast on his face. Although we'd

never spoken before, I knew him as the class representative who always instructed the class to take their seats in the mornings.

“It seems that you often visit our classroom with Hiiragi in mind. What I would like to inquire is, are you in fact his girlfriend?”

His hypocritical courtesy and peculiar manner of speaking where he didn’t allow his facial muscles to move made me wary. I was a magus, so he couldn’t fool me.

—This person was bad news.

How could I have not noticed such a blatantly evil person before? If he had always been this bad, I should have noticed his peculiarity like I did with Yahara and Matsumi-senpai and been on guard.

Had I simply overlooked him? ...Or perhaps, had he only recently become this way?

“I would appreciate it if you would answer my question.”

In my brooding I had completely forgotten to give an answer. As confused as I was, I tried to give as innocuous an answer as possible.

“Um, I’d say we’re really good friends... or something like that.”

“Is that so? However, would you not say that you harbor affection for him as a member of the opposite sex?”

It seemed impolite to me to ask such an intrusive question to somebody in your first proper conversation with them.

He didn’t seem timid in the slightest. But it seemed my displeasure made it across to him.

“That was rude of me. What I’m trying to ask is, why Hiiragi? That about sums it up.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m asking why it had to be him. He doesn’t have any particular talents, nor is he exceedingly attractive. Why are you so fixated on him, in spite of all that?”

Did he simply have romance on the mind, like Sayuri? ...No, there’s no way,

right?

There was clearly some other motive behind his question.

I tried to get a read on what it was, but because it was my first time talking to him I couldn't get it from his expression alone.

I had a thought.

—I hate this person.

The reason I tried to tear Yahara and Matsumi-senpai away from Kouta was simply because they were dangerous. But I didn't want to spend time around this guy for a simpler reason than that. I hated him.

"I don't really see how that has anything to do with you, and I don't really feel any obligation to answer that."

"I see."

The bespectacled man didn't see overly concerned.

"Can I go now?"

"Ah, I apologize for keeping you."

I turned away from him as if I were fleeing.

"Ah, my apologies. May I ask you one last question?"

Not hiding my displeasure as I turned around, I asked "What?"

"Do you believe that it is possible, simply from seemingly normal conversation and behaviour, to make others act according to one's whim?"

Without thinking, my eyes widened.

—Could this guy know about magic?

The bespectacled man gazed interestedly at my panicked demeanor.

"...I think... it's possible..."

"I see. Now I understand."

He spoke almost in a whisper. Then he laughed eerily, to the point that I wasn't sure how concerned I needed to be.

My mood worsening, I gave up on waiting for Kouta and fled the classroom.

Had he known about magic, and was investigating it? No... that wasn't the impression I got. Then what in the world was he investigating?

But there was one thing I was certain of.

He too was a bad influence on Kouta.

Thanks to my unpleasant encounter with the bespectacled man, I was somewhat flustered. My sense of duty was flaring up as well, telling me that I had to do something about Kouta. All throughout class I found myself unable to think of anything else.

When lunch break came, I finally found Kouta in his classroom.

"Kouta! I, um... I have something I need to talk to you about!"

Kouta's confusion was plain on his face. I couldn't blame him; through yesterday, I had been respecting the distance we had placed between ourselves, and now I was acting all assertive all of a sudden.

After somehow convincing him, we made our way to the same courtyard as always. Between the lush trees and the increasingly-overgrown lawn, it seemed less likely than ever that we would be intruded upon.

"What was it you wanted to talk about, Miki?"

"There's, um, something I really wanted to tell you..."

A phrase instantly sprung to mind.

I like you.

I was almost disappointed in myself. I was still being manipulated by magic. I knew that if I confessed to him like this, he wouldn't be able to turn me down, which is why I decided to do it in the first place. It was just like when I kissed him.

Ahh... this was the first time I've ever resented magic.

But I stopped myself. I wanted to be sincere when I was with Kouta.

“I want to release you from this magic that’s nesting inside you.”

I knew that if I was so stupidly honest, there was a chance I would be rejected. But Kouta would accept it. To the very end, he would never reject me.

I was presumptuous.

This late in the game, I was still presumptuous.

“Just cut it out already.”

So even though I should have been able to anticipate his rebuttal, I couldn’t believe it.

“Miki, you’re full of yourself. You’re not even *trying* to understand how I feel. ...No, even if you understand how I feel, you’re still just trying to shove your own ego down my throat. I thought you’d been reflecting on that lately, but I guess I was wrong about that, huh.”

“...I, I have! But even so, I want to save you!”

“I’m not some tool you can use to reinforce your magic. And I’m not some pet you can use to stop being lonely, either.”

“I know that... or I thought I did, at least. But... Kouta, you’re in a really bad way right now! You’re getting stained in Yahara’s attribute, in a bad way, and it’s really dangerous! So I need to use my magic to—”

“Magic is just,”

He spoke with an exasperated look on his face.

“An illusion. It’s all in your head.”

That purposeful method of pushing people aside, of hurting them, of keeping one’s distance from them.

It was like he really was—

“I hold you in a bit of contempt now.”

Masato Yahara, wasn’t he.

He’ll just come hold you in contempt, and that’ll be that. Later.

It turned out exactly like he said it would.

Their speech patterns, their appearances, their magic, everything was lining up.

“Later.”

As if saying he didn’t want to even look at me any more, Kouta turned around and walked off in a flash.

I was left alone in the courtyard.

I was rejected?

—Right. I was rejected.

I was rejected so thoroughly as to fall into despair.

“...That’s weird.”

My magic existed just so I wouldn’t be rejected by others. My magic existed just so I could control others. Why so did this happen on account of my magic?

Why did the person I least wanted to be rejected by, reject me?

“...Uw...”

Sadness? Loneliness? Heartbreak? I threw out all those negative emotions at the very beginning. I thought the only emotions I had left were those that I could manipulate to my benefit. But then, what was this... They’re all still totally here.

“...Uwaa...Whaaaa...”

Tears were something for me to manipulate others with. One of the convenient tools at a woman’s disposal. But although I had believed that, tears were streaming down my face despite nobody else being around.

What was going on... Get a grip already... Why was I crying?

“Uwaa, whaaaaaaa!”

It wasn’t like I *wanted* to cry or anything!

After fleeing from the courtyard, I holed myself up in a stall in the girl’s

bathroom. The bell for fifth period rang, but I couldn't stop sobbing and simply stayed put.

My mind was in turmoil, but I tracked down the one calm part of myself and put it to use.

Even if Kouta ended up hating me, I wouldn't suffer any lasting damage. If an influential girl like Sayuri started hating me it would likely affect the rest of my interpersonal relationships as well, but Kouta didn't belong to any social circles in particular. In fact, due to his relationship with Yahara he was somewhat isolated.

Even if Kouta continued to be subsumed by Yahara, even if he passed the point of no return, it wasn't my fault. If I hadn't been around in the first place, the only thing that would have changed would have been him getting taken over by Yahara's magic even sooner. It was completely different than my friend who had committed suicide.

Besides, why had I become so engrossed in Kouta in the first place?

I have this power. And even if they weren't to Kouta's extent, I've seen plenty of people in danger like he is. For example, that girl from another school that Kouta was with yesterday. But even knowing that, I never once thought to save them. For better or for worse, I've been pretty cold since I discovered magic.

Why was Kouta alone so special?

Why was I so willing to give him my first kiss, even though I would recoil at the thought of doing that with anyone else?

Why did it hurt this much to be rejected by him?

—Ahh, so that's it.

I'm so stupid. It's so simple. Anyone else would have realized it in an instant. Only I could have failed to see it.

I've been violated.

Violated by the most cliched magic imaginable.

The magic of love.

“But... I’m too late...!”

Why hadn’t I realized my feelings sooner? If I had been aware of how I felt, I’m sure I could have come up with any number of ways to get him to like me. There would have been any number of ways.

I hadn’t know what was driving me, so I hadn’t known how to manage it. It was just one failure after another.

The instant I realized what the true nature of my feelings was, the notion of “heartbreak” was born in my chest. It felt akin to the “loneliness” that had tormented me in the past, but the two were hardly comparable. I was furious. Furious at my inability to control my own emotions.

But for some reason, I felt happy as well.

I was happy that there was something that could move me to these lengths. Thank goodness that my emotions weren’t truly dead. Thank goodness that some parts of me were still human!

Ahh, who cares any more! Who cares that Kouta doesn’t have any magic resistance any more! Who cares that he’s being possessed by Yahara any more!

As long as I can keep being with Kouta from now on, who cares any more!

I wanted to devote myself to Kouta. I wanted to make him mine. I wanted to stain him in my attribute. Ahh, my heart was awash with my own selfish ego. So awash with selfishness I might even disappoint myself. But I couldn’t stop it!

Suddenly, the saying about how first loves are never fulfilled floated to my mind.

The first time I heard those words, I laughed with scorn. I’m a magus; I can control people without them even noticing it. If I were to ever fall in love, the thought of it ending in failure was laughable. I thought I’d just be able to seduce whoever I fell for at a whim.

And now look at me! How pathetic I am! How conceited I was!

“Uwaaa, whaaaaaaaaaaa!”

I'm so sad!

How could I miss this once-in-a-lifetime shot?

I couldn't just run home on account of having left my bag in the classroom, so I timed my return with the bell signalling the end of fifth period. My eyelids were puffy and red, so I was immediately grilled by my classmates.

After matter-of-factly tearing me away from the misfortune-starved horde, Sayuri dragged me back to the bathroom. The two of us entered a stall. After making me sit on the toilet seat, she leaned against the door and folded her arms.

"Let me guess, that ass Kouta dumped you, you finally realized that you're in love with him, and you've been crying alone on the toilet for the past hour, right?"

"...Yeah."

After making her promise not to repeat it to anyone, I told Sayuri everything. The face staring back at me from the mirror earlier looked like death, and Sayuri's response after looking closely at it was—

"Ahahaha! So that's it! You're a riot!"

—irreverent laughter.

What was I to do? I was on the verge of livid. I, the supposedly emotionless heroine, had recalled not only how to get sad but also how to get angry.

"W...what are you laughing at!? I'm having an unrequited love over here! I'm so sad I'm bawling my eyes out over here! What's wrong with you, Sayuri!? What, you want to go? Come on, let's go!"

"Ahaha... Sorry, sorry! It's just, you're so innocent, Miki, it's adorable..."

"Adorable!? I've had enough of this... I'm going to cast a spell on you that makes you unable to ever split your chopsticks cleanly..."

"I said I'm sorry for laughing! ...But isn't it too early to call your love unrequited just yet?"

Unsatisfied, I spoke in a low voice, my face still twisted in anger.

“He said he held me in contempt, you know? Other than unrequited, what else could it possibly be...”

“I’m telling you, if he really didn’t want to go out with you any more, he would have said it differently. It’s proof that he just wants you to better yourself.”

Was it? Wasn’t it a matter of course that nobody who was that disappointed in me would ever want to go out with me?

“You were so unaware of your own feelings, all that the lucky guy you fell for heard from you was ‘I don’t really understand, but I want you to stay with me. I want you to put up with my selfishness. I want you to do as I say.’ And why do you think he was willing to do all that for you?”

After hearing it put that way, I was all the more impressed at Kouta for putting up with me for so long. It was no wonder he hated me now.

“...That’s, well, because Kouta is the kind of person who can’t reject anyone.”

“Nope. It’s because he’s interested in you.”

“What?”

That was too far out of left field.

“This is just my intuition talking, but Miki, did you by any chance have a bunch of male friends in middle school? You know, doing you favors and stuff?”

“I don’t know about favors, but I did have friends...”

As long as I had my magic, such a feat was simple. I had put a lot of effort into getting people under my control, male and female alike. I had long thought that my ability to do so was my one redeeming quality.

“You know, those guys were probably all into you!”

“Ehh...? Your logic’s getting a little shaky...”

“You really *are* blind to your whole sex appeal, aren’t you. I can definitely tell that you didn’t put much thought into romance up until now. Hmm... a quiz, then. What would you say is the kind of girl that guys are the most likely to fall

for?”

“Huh? Umm... Someone who’s cute, mature, and respectful... and maybe good at cooking? And long hair is probably better. Anyways, that sort of girly girl, right? I don’t really fit the type, you know.”

“Well, a girly girl like that’ll be a hit with the guys for sure. But that’s not it. That type’ll be popular, but not the *most* popular. The *most* popular type is gonna be the type of girl whose looks are only so-so, is easy to talk to, who they can be themselves around, and who looks like they’re having a good time when they’re chatting. Other than the bit about the looks, it’s a description that fits you to a T.”

“You’re not just saying stuff to cheer me up, are you?”

“I’m as serious as can be. Girls are pretty much the same way, but guys don’t really go for girl who are out of their league. They fall for girls that they feel like they have a shot with. And you’re kind of a natural at provoking guys that way, Miki. You try so hard to make sure the people you interact with are having fun, it makes guys wonder if you might be into them. You’re a master at accidentally giving the wrong impression. The first time I met you, I wanted to kill you because I thought you were doing it on purpose.”

“You’re scary...”

“Wait a minute, haven’t you, like, had a bunch of guys confess to you?”

I was silent. I couldn’t refute it.

“So what’s up with that ‘I don’t know anything about love’ aura you give off? Anyways, you should be aware of how popular you are.”

“...Well, enough about me being popular—”

“I’ll kill you. Don’t go getting cocky on me. I’ll kill you.”

“Let me finish! Geez, the look in your eyes is scary! ...But even if I’m popular, that’s different from Kouta liking me, right? I’m pretty confident that he doesn’t seem me in a romantic light.”

“Maybe the two of you are more alike than you think. I’m pretty sure he holds you in good favor... Maybe he doesn’t realize it, either.”

...Now that she mentioned it, Kouta had a habit of avoiding self-reflection, so him being unaware of his feelings was only natural.

“And for that matter, he didn’t ignore you or anything even after you started acting all arrogant around him, right?”

Thinking back to how Kouta was originally, I mumbled, “I think so.”

“Then you got this in the bag.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Even though he might not realize it, it’s not your personality that’s annoying him so much. It’s not your selfishness. It’s what we were just talking about, how you don’t put things clearly. He’s mad because you properly said that you liked him.”

I wanted to tell her that there’s no way that was the case, but something Kouta had told me floated to mind.

I have to wonder, why do you spend so much time confirming my feelings without voicing your own even once?

“Even if Kouta’s like you were and doesn’t realize he’s in love with you, all you have to saying is something like ‘I like you so much I can’t leave you alone. I’m sorry.’ and he’d forgive you with a sappy look on his face. ‘Cause it’s pretty clear he definitely has feelings for you. Guys are pretty simple, you know, and they don’t really get hung up on the past. So you’ve got this in the bag. Or should I call it an easy win?”

I immediately wanted to rebut, saying that there was no way it could be that easy.

But when I ran a simulation inside my head, I felt like the result would be exactly as she predicted. I could almost imagine Kouta saying “It’s fine, don’t worry about it,” and forgiving me with a slightly flustered look on his face.

That was amazing.

Sayuri came up with an incantation to salvage a relationship that not even I could think of a way to like it was nothing.

I gazed at Sayuri with newfound respect.

“Sayuri, are you by any chance actually a powerful magus?”

I had thought that there was nothing I had left to learn from others when it came to communication.

“Magic? What are you going on about? Well, I guess it does make sense that you’d be no match for me, given that you’re just a little fledgeling when it comes to love and I’ve got love on the brain twenty-four seven.”

That... made sense. There was no way I could compare to a romance fanatic like her.

Sayuri gave my head a soft knock.

“Go get ‘em, Miki.”

“...Will do.”

It was possible that despite my preconceptions, magic wasn’t actually all that special. It was possible that others could use similar abilities.

It wasn’t that nobody else knew that magic existed. They just didn’t need to. After all, you can do things similar to magic without even noticing.

But... I still wanted to believe that my magic was special. I couldn’t so easily discard something that had supported me for so long.

There may well come a day when I find the degree to which I was obsessed with magic embarrassing, but that day is yet to come.

I still believed in my magic.

It was still something deeply important to me.

I decided to go see Kouta once school let out.

But thinking about it, it would be difficult to hold a normal conversation with him given how things ended last time. I had to resolve myself if I was going to be able to make up with him.

I had no choice but to confess my love for him.

Upon realizing this I began to lose my nerve a little, and the next-door classroom began to seem farther and farther away. No matter how many deeps breaths I took, my heart continued pounding away. My shoulders stiffened up from the stress, and I even began to feel a headache come on. After slapping my unobedient legs over and over, I finally reached the classroom.

Kouta wasn't there. But his bag was, so it seemed likely that he'd be back for it soon. With some hesitation, I headed for his seat and sat down. I fell prostrate on the desk he used day in and day out.

That was all it took for my affection to start overflowing. Self-awareness. My heart felt so itchy that I wanted to scratch it. But at the same time it felt pleasant, like the blood pumping out of my heart was warmer than usual.

How odd. I hadn't realized what these feelings were until today, and yet I was well past the point of doubting them.

I liked Kouta.

I liked Kouta a lot.

I would confess to him, and make a request. An egotistical request for him to become mine.

But who cared if it was egotistical.

I liked him, after all.

I loved him.

So he would forgive me, wouldn't he? That was what love meant, wasn't it?

In order to hide my giddy face, I lay even flatter on his desk. Kouta didn't seem to be coming back, but I waited for him anyways.

I was so lost in the throngs of love that I had completely forgotten.

Kouta was on the verge of not being Kouta any more.

Kouta Hiiragi's Closed World (IV) Masato Yahara's Closed World (II)

An abandoned hospital. A forgotten cemetery. A tunnel that had fallen into disuse. A sea of trees where the sun's light couldn't reach.

He wasn't in any such place.

Let's say it was a completely ordinary shopping mall out in the sticks. The kind of place that would fill you with déjà vu the first time you visited it, a mass-produced mall with the same kinds of stores as any other. But because it's the most convenient one in the region, it's lively in its own way, with money changing hands and people strolling about.

That kind of place.

Masato Yahara was in such a place.

"Why are you in a place like this, Masato?"

"'Cuz there's nothing here."

"Nothing? It's pretty lively, isn't it?"

"Then go on, try to imagine somewhere with nothing in it. No people. No shops. No street lights. No streets. Does a place like that seem normal to you? Could ya stay in a place like that without feeling anything? You couldn't, could ya. A place like that's already special. There's somethin' called 'nothingness' there. And nothingness has too much of an impact. It's pretty damn far from feeling like there's nothing there."

"So it's like... it's unnatural?"

"Yeah, basically. And I can't stay in a place like that. I stand out too much against nothingness. I become special. And an incomplete existence like me can't stay like that."

"So that's why you're here?"

“Yup. Place like this lets me blend into day-to-day life, become homogenized, and not feel anything. That’s what I mean by ‘there’s nothing here’. ...Let’s call it ‘nil’ to differentiate it from nothingness. Nil exists in places where I can exist unconsciously. I’m always right next to you. But nil is folded up real small, so it penetrates the little holes in our day-to-day life and makes you forget about it.”

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

“What’s that noise? Does it have something to do with nil?”

“Yeah. That noise induces nil. As long as it exists, we’re gonna keep getting absorbed by nil.”

“Is it bad if that happens?”

“What, you can’t fuckin’ tell? In nil, even a dead guy like me can exist. Hell, I can exist just as well as you can. So basically, the kinds of oblivious guys who live snuggled up in nil are worth the same as if they were dead. It means their lives have shit for meaning or value.”

“But, there’s lots of people like that.”

“Exactly.”

“Are you one of them, Masato?”

“If I’m not careful, I’ll get engulfed.”

“Is that why you tried to break free?”

“Basically. But I fucked up.”

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

What a grating noise. Every rattle makes me want to run away. It makes me want to succumb to irritation.

“Masato... I can’t take it any more. I want to get out.”

“You could probably actually make it, Kou. In the end, all I was was ordinary. I couldn’t escape the noise. But you’re different. You’re special, you’re abnormal. You can definitely make it out. I’m sure of it.”

“But, what can I do?”

“Don’t worry.”

Masato spoke with a kind smile. He’d never smiled like that when he was alive.

“You already know the way.”

I, who was still just barely “me”, was melting. Melting like an ice cream cone that had been abandoned under a blazing sun. Halfway between a liquid and a solid, I spread unceremoniously across the ground and became worthless.

Becoming worthless like this was no good. I had to find a purpose again. Otherwise I would stop being human.

Then someone interrupted my dissolution from within, bringing along a sound that resembled chains.

Go ahead, do as you will.

I, Kouta Hiiragi, am “white”.

I take on the colors of others.

Go on, I’m right here!

And thus.

Masato Yahara is right here.

From then on, I acted automatically. I became no more than a machine carrying out my duty. My field of view, perhaps the very world, became blurry and unclear. I didn’t know where to focus my sight. I couldn’t perceive the school grounds, which I should have been intimately familiar with, as anything but a meaning flabby mass. It was like the world had been overlaid by a mosaic. I hadn’t lost any of my knowledge, so I was able to go through the motions of everyday life. Like an NPC moving according to its programming. But the ground felt unsteady. It felt unnatural and unsettling, like the soles of my shoes were

covered in a powerful gum.

In accordance with the order that had come from deep within me, I was on the roof. Against a backdrop of twilight stained in week-old blood, I stepped solidly on the oddly-dirty concrete and looked down upon the gradually depopulating townscape. Lined up on the street was a stream of kei cars^[16], all being sucked in by the flashiest building in town: the pachinko parlor.

A cheap end to a cheap world.

An obsolete townscape like that fit Shuuichi Akiyama perfectly. I wanted to dump bird shit all over his honors student's glasses and post pictures of it on Instagram. It would be satisfying as hell, and I bet it'd get quite the response.

Now then, I'm going to thoroughly divulge everything about Shuuichi Akiyama. I'm going to expose him, enumerate him, crush him piece by piece, and pulverize him.

"What did you hope to accomplish by calling me all the way up here, Hiiragi?"

Ignoring Akiyama's question, I spoke.

"You can come in now, Sudou."

Instead of looking at the door she was coming through, I gauged Akiyama's reaction. He was frantically hiding his emotions, but he couldn't fully contain the look of surprise in his eyes.

"You're the girl who was with Yahara, aren't you."

Not knowing how much I knew, he gave a fairly safe remark.

"She's given me a lot to think about. ...First of all, out with it. Why didn't you come forward, even though you were the last one to see Masato?"

Akiyama gazed reproachfully at Sudou. Following his line of sight, I laid eyes on her for the first time since she'd arrived.

Her long, unevenly-dyed hair was blowing in the wind, and she looked more dishevelled than before. She was pale again today, too. Her habit of raising the corners of her mouth was unchanged, but although that made it look like she was smiling she was actually more frightened than normal.

She was frightened.

Not of Akiyama, but of me.

“Your manner of speaking has become quite haughty, Hiiragi. Are you finally showing your true colors? ...Well, that’s fine. As for your answer, it’s quite a simple matter. The reason I didn’t come forward was for her sake.”

That wasn’t the answer I’d been expecting.

“What do you mean? What in the world does she have to do with you not coming forward?”

“Hmph. It’s something of a delicate matter, so I was hoping not to have to say it, but now that it’s come to this I suppose I have little choice. Our friend over there had been seduced by Yahara and was on her way to a hotel with him. I stayed silent because I would feel bad if I revealed that fact to the world.”

“Didn’t you think that, just maybe, your testimony would be important to catching the killer?”

“If I deemed that to be the case, I would have ignored my qualms and come forward immediately. My testimony would have been worthless. By no means would it have helped the investigation whatsoever.”

“Way to go and decide that on your own. You never know what information might lead to the killer, right?”

“Quite so. They say that a butterfly flapping its wings in one hemisphere can cause a tornado in the other, and the same could of course be said about murder investigations. But when I weighed that small chance against that young lady’s privacy, I chose the latter.”

It was a perfectly reasonable answer. And his voice had been steady throughout, almost as if he had been expecting the question.

With that, the reason I had initially suspected Akiyama vanished.

But that didn’t matter.

I no longer doubted Akiyama.

I had already decided that he was the killer.

“Christ you’re obnoxious. Just fucking confess already.”

Taken aback at my harsh, exasperated words, Akiyama stiffened momentarily.

My words were simply the result of unintentional candor, but to Akiyama they must have seemed like a tactic to rattle him, because he shut his mouth and put on a composed expression.

The conversation heading in the direction seemed favorable to me, so I made no effort to correct his misinterpretation.

“Alright, next question then. When Yamazaki took his little fall, you were at the school, weren’t you. That’s what she claims.”

After seemingly glaring at Sudou for an instant, he nodded with an, “Indeed.”

“I was quite flustered when I found out about the incident. I suppose I can’t blame you for being suspicious of the fact that I was at the school when Ryuusuke Yamazaki fell from the roof. Although I was in the parking lot and not on the roof, I didn’t think that there was anyone who could corroborate my claim. I’m not proud of it, but I had no choice but to protect myself. I had no idea that there was somebody who saw me in that parking lot.”

“Apparently Yamazaki was screaming. Why didn’t you notice anything?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer. I don’t have much to say beyond that I simply didn’t notice. I was deep in thought at the time.”

Akiyama spread his arms exaggeratedly and shook his head.

Irritated by his affected behavior, I heaved a heavy, antagonistic sigh.

“Well then, how do we want to do this... Alright, let’s go with that approach. Akiyama, do you believe in ghosts?”

Akiyama’s eyes narrowed at my abrupt question.

“What’s this, all of a sudden? Ghosts? Must I really answer that question?”

“Yeah.”

“...Very well then. Ghosts, hm. There are no shortage of people who believe in them, so I can’t just unconditionally write off their potential existence. However, I find it difficult to put much stock in something so unscientific. And

with the proliferation of digital cameras, pictures and films of ghosts have been reduced to little more than fabricated entertainment. That is about where I stand.”

“Makes sense. You would think that, wouldn’t you. But even if you don’t believe in them, you wouldn’t exactly go around kicking gravestones, would you? And you’d still get creeped out by Suicide Forest^[17], wouldn’t you?”

“But of course. Anyone would be on edge and seized by fear upon visiting Suicide Forest.”

“Right, so scared you wouldn’t have time to be deep in thought.”

I could hear Akiyama taking a deep breath. He was quick on the uptake and had probably realized the purpose of my roundabout line of questioning.

“Maybe it’s not on the same level as Suicide Forest. But a school at night is plenty creepy. An outrageous, distorted institution that crams a bunch of kids together and gives them all the same instructions. When night rolls around, that distortion stands out bright. It creates an atmosphere that pushes people away, so much so that someone once told me it was a barrier. It’s one thing for a bunch of people to come together and shoot off fireworks, but there’s no way one guy’s gonna come to school alone at night and get lost in thought.”

I stared coldly at Akiyama.

“And you wanna tell me that under those circumstances, you didn’t hear Yamazaki’s scream?”

After a slight pause, Akiyama replied.

“...I didn’t hear it. I’m dumbfounded by my own thickheadedness.”

Even if forced to admit unseemly things, Akiyama still feigned innocence. I supposed it was the proper reaction if he wanted to dodge the issue. Suspicious as he was, this wouldn’t make for proof.

But I was cornering him bit by bit. I could see in his face that he was wondering if he had left behind any definitive evidence.

He probably didn’t realize it, but he was remarkably easy to read.

“Next up, let’s figure out a way to make someone fall off the roof from down

in the parking lot.”

Akiyama raised an eyebrow.

“...Does such a method even exist?”

Sudou interjected almost reflexively.

“If it’s a trick you’re looking for, there’s plenty one could use. Just to make sure, Sudou, but all you saw was that Akiyama was in the parking lot, and not what he was doing. Is that right?”

“Y...yes...”

“As you can see, the parking lot is pretty far from the roof. But, and you can confirm this from here, there’s a clear line of sight, so you can easily see what’s going on up here from down there. And even though they’ve been talking about putting up a new fence up here for forever, there still isn’t one. There was an incident, so it makes even more sense now, but this place has been off-limits for a while. If you’re standing at the edge of the roof, all it’d take is a little push and down you’d go.”

I revealed what I had been hiding in my pocket.

“What is that?”

I answered Sudou, whose face showed visible signs of relief.

“It’s the remote for a drone.”

As I flicked a switch and tilted a lever, the drone I had placed on the roof ahead of time took off. There was a cord of red yarn attached to its camera, the other end of which was firmly fastened around the doorknob.

“Sudou, would you mind not moving for a bit? I’m a beginner at this whole drone thing, so flying this is a little tough.”

As instructed, Sudou stiffened her body. I then maneuvered the drone towards her back. As the yarn drew taught, Sudou received a solid thump to the back and stumbled a step forwards.

If she had been on the edge of the roof, she would have certainly fallen.

“I chose red yarn so it’d be easy to see, but it would be even more feasible with something stronger like piano wire. If you operated it well, you could easily use this setup to push Yamazaki and send him off the edge.”

As I unveiled the trick, Akiyama just stared silently at me.

But his lips had lost their tension.

“...Fufu.”

Little by little, his mask was peeling off. I could almost hear the tearing sound. His hideous true self distorted and expanded, making it impossible for the mask to stay on. His naked expression laid bare his exclusive true form.

No matter how hard he tried to conceal it, he could hide it no more.

—Akiyama was broken.

Ahh... I was successful.

My goal of exposing him was steadily coming to fruition.

“Hiiragi, I’m disappointed in you.”

“How so?”

I posed my question, still sneering.

“You don’t realize it? Your trick is riddled with holes. First of all, operating a drone like that at night is impossible. Was the sky clear that day? I don’t remember, but even if it had been possible to make out the drone by moonlight, it would be far too difficult to maneuver the drone exactly as you wanted. Just as you yourself were struggling just now. In order to put this trick of yours into practice, you would need to practice during the day to even have a chance at pulling it off. But this is a school. If you tried to do that, even on a holiday, you would be sure to catch someone’s attention. Practicing would be impossible. And the final nail in your coffin is the noise from the propeller. It’s inconceivable that, being at the scene of the incident, she would have heard the scream but not the propeller.”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

“And furthermore, I own nothing resembling a drone. If you look into it, you

can verify that easily.”

Having trounced my crude trick, his face filled with triumph.

His triumphant face was so comical, I couldn't help but let out a scornful laugh.

“What's so funny?”

“Don't go jumping to conclusions on me, now. I mean, I wanted to see what kind of face you'd make, so I let you just to conclusions, but still. Who the hell said anything about you killing Yamazaki with this trick? I told you, didn't I. There's plenty of tricks one could use.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“What was I trying to prove with this experiment? There are certainly ways to make Yamazaki fall while you're in the parking lot. But they're all meaningless tricks like that one. This isn't some mystery novel; even if the trick isn't exposed, once you're suspected that's it for you. The cops'll take you in on circumstantial evidence, and once you confess during the interrogation, nobody'll care about how elaborate your trick was. The minute you let yourself fall under suspicion, your plan failed. And you know that just as well as I do. But you let your misgivings get the best of you, and you ended up at the school that night.”

The one I looked at now was not Akiyama but Sudou. Just as I predicted, her look of relief from earlier had vanished, replaced once more by paleness.

“In other words, this incident was beyond your expectations.”

I went on, sneering all the while.

“There were two points I was trying to make there. The first is that this place is so dangerous, even a lame trick like my stunt with the drone could legitimately kill someone. The next is that if someone pushed Yamazaki, even by accident, he could easily have fallen.”

I slapped Yamazaki's killer on the back.

“Isn't that right, Sudou?”

“—eep.”

Sudou had been terrified when she was talking to me. She had been desperately trying to avoid having me suspect that she was hiding something.

But there was no way she could hide something like that from the “white” Kouta Hiiragi.

“Sudou, you referred to Akiyama as ‘the bespectacled guy’ as if you didn’t know who he was, right? But given how obsessed with Masato you were, you were looking for leads regarding his murder, right? The minute you decided to seek out the truth, it would have been obvious what you needed to look into first. The last person to interact with Masato, his classmate with the glasses. Shuuichi Akiyama. It would be absurd for you to look into me before you investigated him, don’t you think?”

“...Uu, ah...”

“But you hid that fact from me. It goes without saying that that was because that information was inconvenient for you. You thought that if I talked to Akiyama in any detail, my suspicions about Yamazaki’s killer would turn to you.”

Perhaps to keep her from confessing, Akiyama moved between myself and Sudou as if trying to conceal her. Although she was trying to feign composure, she couldn’t begin to contain her trembling. What a shy girl she was.

“So in short, I ordered Sudou to push Yamazaki off the roof. Is that what you want to say? Why, I didn’t even have a motive for wanting Yamazaki dead.”

“Oh, but you did. He was complicit in Masato’s death, right? I bet you made him transport the body.”

That was probably what had happened. Akiyama’s reactions had already passed surprise and moved to downright panic. But no matter how obvious it was, he still frantically tried to keep up appearances.

“...That delusion of yours likely stems from having seen Yamazaki looking for me the other day. But we can set your delusions aside for a moment. Now, hypothetically speaking, let’s say that I did have a motive for wanting him dead. Even then, how could I induce her to kill? We aren’t even acquaintances, so there’s no way she would follow such a command. And even if I had convinced her, don’t you think it a bit odd that I would go out of my way to come to school

at the time of the murder?”

“You just don’t know when to give up, do you. I just said it; this incident was beyond your expectations. Sudou never had any intention of killing Yamazaki. His fall was nothing more than an accident.”

“Your speculations become more and more preposterous. There are simply too many coincidences in your theory. Whether or not there was a fence, there’s no way he’d simply fall.”

“The first thing we have to figure out is why the two of them were on the roof in the first place. It’s off-limits, and what’s more, it was late at night. Of course, the meeting must have been arranged beforehand, but it’s difficult to imagine Sudou having any reason to meet with Yamazaki directly. The one she was really on the roof to meet was you, Akiyama.”

Akiyama scrunched up his face a bit.

“Sudou was probably pretty surprised when she got to the roof and found out she’d been tricked. Some happened that was so surprising that she accidentally pushed him off. ...Now, this is just me guess, but did it perhaps seem like Yamazaki was going to rape her?”

Sudou was trembling and holding herself tightly. Based on her behavior, it looked like my speculation was on the mark.

“I mean, it’s Yamazaki we’re talking about. He was probably shaking you down for hush money, so you decided to take advantage of his greed. ‘I can’t get you the money now, but I can get you a girl instead.’ Something along those lines, right?”

“I... He told me that a man was waiting for me on the roof who could tell me about the murder...”

“Well, of course you didn’t know about the give-and-take that you were being made a part of. And after being attacked by Yamazaki, you resisted. And because you don’t go to this school, and because it was late at night and hard to see, you probably didn’t realize that there wasn’t a fence. So you pushed Yamazaki away with all your might, and—”

Splat.

“He ended up falling to his death.”

“Ah, ahhhh...”

Sudou collapsed on the spot.

Her obsession with Masato hadn't been the only cause of her poor condition. Even if it hadn't been intentional, the sin of murder still weighed heavy on her. That, combined with the fact that she had to hide it from me, must have put enormous pressure on her.

Akiyama gazed at Sudou's fallen figure, his eyes as cold as if he were looking at trash.

“Akiyama's true objective in calling Sudou to the roof wasn't to have her kill Yamazaki. His plan was to become your ally after you had been raped, then to add you as a partner under the pretext of taking revenge on Yamazaki. Even if he couldn't inspire you to want to kill Yamazaki, he was hoping to at least trick you to the point where he would be able to use you. I can only guess at how he eventually planned on killing Yamazaki, but plenty of methods would have worked. For example, he could have given you a lethal poison to give to Yamazaki but told you it was a sleep medication. He could have told you to shoot Yamazaki with a model gun, only for the gun he provided to be real. Those were just off the top of my head, but you get the idea. The moment he made you his partner, Akiyama's plan would have been basically put into place. He would make you kill Yamazaki while he maintained a firm alibi. That was all he needed. ...And after that, well... Sudou, Akiyama never gave you a way to contact him, did he?”

Still sitting on the ground, Sudou nodded.

“Do you know why? Because it would be a problem for him if it could be proven that you two ever interacted. All he had to do to avoid suspicion from the police was to make them think the two of you hadn't met by the time you were made to kill Yamazaki.”

“B-but I myself knew... And if the police caught me, there's no way I'd be able to keep silent...”

“All that means is that he had to kill you before it got to that point. Like, you

killed Yamazaki out of hatred for him raping you, but then you couldn't bear the weight of your sins and committed suicide. He probably planned on using some plausible scenario like that."

Sudou's eyes went wide, and she looked at Akiyama.

Akiyama no longer took any notice of her.

"Why is it, I wonder? For some reason, I know exactly how this bastard thinks. Sudou, why do you think he chose you as an accomplice in the first place? It's because you're the kind of person he wouldn't mind throwing to the wolves... Hell, he probably thinks that you deserve to die. After all, you were gonna sleep with Masato Yahara the first time you met him. After all, men are creatures who view unchaste women as worthless. That's why so many serial killers go after hookers; they barely feel any guilt. I'm sure that's why Akiyama thought you'd make an excellent 'stepping stone' for him to carry out justice with."

Sudou could no longer bear to even look at Akiyama.

"Your words are all baseless. You've managed to spin quite the tale, especially in the face of the fact that she wasn't even raped."

But his voice sounded like he lacked the will to even bluff.

"Then let's not talk about your plans, and talk about what you actually did instead. After she killed Yamazaki, your biggest concern was that Sudou would turn herself in. After she did, all your crimes would be exposed one after another. You probably wanted to kill her, huh. And to buy time until then, you pretended to lend a sympathetic ear, lied and said you'd help her, and ordered her not to tell anyone else. You wouldn't be able to handle it if any information got out, after all."

I glanced at Sudou's expression to confirm my theory, but she was staring off into space and no longer responsive.

"But Sudou didn't follow your directions, she came and talked to me before you could kill her. She wanted to know the truth of the incident so badly she couldn't help herself. And you can hardly blame her, after the curse Masato put on her. That's something you needed to realize if you were going to use her. But this is you we're talking about. You're probably under the misimpression that

Sudou's idiocy let me figure out the truth. But that's completely wrong. After all, you were the one trying to use her. Your big failure was not realizing that she would come talk to me despite being told to keep quiet. That was your mistake."

Still grinning, I spit out my next words.

"Get it now, you incompetent excuse for a class rep?"

"...Me? Incompetent?"

At that provocation, Akiyama's previously controlled expression shifted radically.

Of course. Questioning his ability to carry out his duty would resonate with him more than anything else. His pride was far too high to ever admit to his own failure. To that end, he was even willing to disfigure the truth.

"Impossible. Every choice I made was correct and proper. I could not possibly have blundered. This incompetent girl simply stood in my way and made a mess of everything!"

Unable to contain his rage, Akiyama foolishly acknowledged everything he'd done. A wry laugh escaped my lips.

"Nah, that's not it. You just weren't up to snuff. You're just fundamentally bad at using others. And you're definitely no magus. It's you we're talking about, after all. You seem to think that everyone else lives under the same value system you do. You can only measure with your own scales, so nothing ever goes the way you plan. Come on, man, not everyone lives in the same damn world as you."

"You're babbling. There only is one world, is there not? Everyone lives in the same world."

"You see a rabbit pounding mochi when you look at the moon, of course *you'd* think that. You don't understand a damn thing about what people are like behind closed doors. So you can't understand anything about other people. If you want to understand people, you have to start by realizing that you can never really know everything about someone. But you'll probably never really understand that, huh."

In response to my words, Akiyama knit his eyebrows. But before long, he let out a laugh that would put any B movie villain to shame.

“What, did I hurt your feelings or something?”

“Fufu... It seems I was right after all. Your remarks reveal your dogged insistence on manipulating others. You really do like manipulating others into doing your dirty work, don’t you? And you riled up all of our campus’s freaks for sport. Of course, Masato Yahara was one of them. Depending on how you look at it, perhaps he was a victim too. You were the ringleader behind this whole incident, evil in the flesh. So I suppose you learning the truth of this incident—”

His eyes, glittering with a dull light like the scales of a fresh fish, turned to me.

“—*was merely a blessing in disguise.*”

Ahh, this guy.

He really didn’t understand anything.

He didn’t even realize that his malice far surpassed that of anyone else.

“Why are you smiling, Hiiragi? It seems you don’t realize the situation you’re in.”

“You’re the one who doesn’t know what’s going on. Did you really think I just called you up here to tell you that I knew everything?”

“...Are you saying you didn’t?”

“I’m not planning on handing you over to the police. I have no intention of being so lenient. To be honest, I don’t even give a shit if you’re really the killer. I just can’t stand you, so I’m going to completely pulverize you. But even though I’ve already exposed so much, you haven’t shown a hint of remorse. You just got all defiant and went back to your little make-believe world. Honestly, I didn’t think you were going to be this stupid, you fucking jackass.”

I pulled out my phone.

“So now you’ve left me with no choice but to rely on my last resort.”

I called a certain number. I had made them promise to come as soon as they received a call from me.

As I put my phone away, I spread my arms and laughed.

“Now then, let’s see how much filthy pus you’ve got built up in there.”

Footsteps rang out from the stairs, and the door to the roof swung open.

“Kusukusu... kusukusukusu...”

The girl seemed unable to contain her peculiar laugh, which sounded like it was coming from a gap in her teeth, in anticipation of what we were about to do.

“Hiiragi, I’m here!”

Her bangs were cut diagonally, and her hair was braided in the back. Her childlike face and short stature contrasted with her large bust, she was a deeply immoral-looking high schooler.

Twisting even her malice into innocence, her unsullied mind was that of a saintly fool.

An “apparatus” I had been keeping in reserve.

Her rainbow-colored eyes looked like a drainage ditch filled with salad oil, and as she turned them to Akiyama she raised her voice in disappointment.

“...Ehh... Like, there’s a sorta boring guy here... Hiiragi, you said there’d be something interesting up here, but this guy’s just a common old dull red.”

Confused, Akiyama was clearly panicking.

Up until now, Akiyama had always planned on retaking the initiative. No matter how close I got to the truth, all he thought he had to do was eventually kill me.

But in spite of how dense he was, he realized. That now that Ririko Matsumi, who had the power to destroy everything, was here, the situation had changed. That now, the place he was standing was no longer his stage.

There was no way someone like him knew of an easy way to control this twisted world, which was like a candy sculpture halfway through production.

“At this rate, Akiyama, if I just shove the truth in front of you, you’d just pervert it to suit your own self-righteousness and escape the violence I’m trying

to cause you. If I want to crush you, I first have to teach you how to be afraid, or I'm not going to get anywhere.Matsumi-senpai.”

“Aye aye!”

Glaring at Shuuichi Akiyama, I spit out my next words.

“Scan Shiho Sudou.”

Still sitting in shock, Sudou raised her head in surprise. She probably hadn't expected to be thrust into the spotlight again. But it couldn't be helped. She was clearly a member of the supporting cast here.

And now, she would taking the starring role.

“Sorry, Shiho Sudou.”

I wasn't even looking at the uninteresting girl.

“This was the real reason I brought you here. Just like how there needs to be a scene where someone dies at the beginning of any killing game novel, there needed to be a tutorial for Akiyama here.”

So for the sake of the story, I need you to fall into despair.

“So I just have to scan that girl over there? Okey dokey—”

In her innocence, Matsumi-senpai hadn't picked up on any of my malice. I simply tripped her kindness and regressed her from a human to a machine.

“Beep bibibi, beep beep bibibibibi.”

Her eyes went out of focus. But she was definitely perceiving Shiho Sudou's core.

“What? What's going on?”

Anyone watching would no doubt be confused. Even if you didn't know exactly what she was doing, it was clear that it was nothing good. Even if you couldn't tell what was inside the jack-in-the-box, it definitely wasn't going to be anything pleasant.

“Beep bibibi, beep beep bibibibibi. ———Scanning complete.”

“Good work, Senpai. Now, would you mind verbalizing it for us?”

“Sure!”

Sudou trembled in fear at Ririko Matsumi’s eccentricity. She had been used by Akiyama, made to bear his sins, and now I was going to crush her. What a pitiable girl she was.

I felt guilty.

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

But those feelings of guilt were drowned out by the auditory hallucinations.

“SHIHO SUDOU, age sixteen.”

Would she have known that name, even if I hadn’t told her? I only half-knew how her scanning even worked.

“A second-year at the private Sakisei Academy. Lives with her birth mother, her stepfather, and her older stepbrother. Her house has four bedrooms. Her room, which is on the second floor, is so messy that there’s nowhere to stand. Her father is a civil servant, her mother is a housewife, and their family finances are stable. Her clingy nature makes her disastrously bad at reading the mood, and she doesn’t have many friends. Her few friends often betray her. She does not currently have a boyfriend, but she has slept with two men.”

“Huh? What? What’s going on...?”

Sudou still didn’t understand what had just been begun. Judging from her pale lips, all she understood was that it was something terrifying.

“Presuming that she is involved, she is thoroughly obsessed with Masato Yahara’s incident. She killed Ryuusuke Yamazaki by pushing him off this roof. She has tried to kill herself twice before. However, not even her parents showed her any sympathy. She is lonely. She is lonely. She has a strong inferiority complex in regards to her looks and academic ability.”

The things she tried to hide, the things she needed to hide, were being exposed in front of all of us.

No longer able to even speak, Sudou’s eyes were bugging out at Matsumi-senpai as though she were looking at the Devil.

“She has both been bullied and bullied others. She strongly desires power. She fears the strong, yet is jealous of them, and she finds the weak reassuring, yet despises them. She lacks willpower. She is bad at forming habits. She is not a morning person. She dislikes using stamps on LINE. She enjoys spending time on pornographic websites.”

People, surprisingly, don't know themselves particularly well. So when a fortuneteller or a swindler makes surprising inferences from just their personality, they believe in the illusion that their true nature had been probed into.

But what Ririko Matsumi does is expose them objectively.

Everyone wants to believe that they're special. They want to possess some sort of unique identity. Some would even go so far as to say that not being special is the same as being worthless.

But although this may seem obvious, the vast majority of people aren't anything even approaching special. And whether they are or not, they're too small to ever change the world. One person can't save the world, nor can they destroy it.

And Shiho Sudou was no exception. What became eminently clear when her true nature was exposed like this was that she was the kind of common, ordinary person that you could find anywhere. The reality of it was that she was inferior, not superior.

She had been trying to avoid looking straight at that reality despite becoming gradually aware of it, but now it had been firmly thrust upon her.

“She has been coerced a number of times by her NEET brother to have physical relations. Although she despises him, she relishes the feeling of being desired. Her father also views her in a sexual light. She is aware that her mother is jealous of her as a woman. As a result, she doesn't feel like her home is somewhere she belongs. She hates her home. She doesn't feel like her school is somewhere she belongs. She hates her school. She doesn't feel like society is somewhere she belongs. She hates the world for being unkind to her. She wishes it were kinder to her. She wishes she were held more dearly. But she doesn't care. She doesn't care what happens to her. But she doesn't want to be

ignored. She wants to be saved. She wants to be saved—”

“Stop it! Stop it already! Stop, stop, stop!”

Wailing, Sudou tried to lunge at Matsumi-senpai. But I had anticipated that, and stopped her by holding her down. She soon stopped resisting and, drained of strength, collapsed on the spot.

Without moving, Sudou began crying like an animal.

The exposed viscera inside her was unsurprisingly grotesque. That was all there was to it, but that alone was as intense as could be.

“Wah. Why are you crying? Now I feel all sorry...”

Ririko Matsumi had no idea how cruel a thing it was to expose somebody to the world. And she could hardly be blamed for that; to her, being able to see everything was the only condition she knew.

Looking down on the sobbing Shiho Sudou, I felt like I understood why she had been so fixed on Masato’s incident.

Shiho Sudou was full of openings. And she didn’t much care what she filled those holes with. She just needed something that let her believe that her existence was important.

So she embroiled herself in a murder investigation, thinking that perhaps she could play a key role. It was a tragedy, but ironically therein lie the meaning that she had been seeking. By pursuing the truth behind the incident, she could escape from the idleness she felt plaguing her life.

It was no secret that she was full of openings. And regrettably, everyone around her took advantage of them. Her family did, her classmates did, Masato Yahara did, Shuuichi Akiyama did, and I did. Without someone to protect them, a person with such openings had no choice but to be used by others.

—Someone to protect them.

—A person filled with openings.

It was an assessment I had heard somewhere before.

But I wasn’t going to think too deeply about it.

In any case, Shiho Sudou wouldn't be able to go back to normal after having her heart rudely trampled all over like that. Once a person has their existence put into words and forced upon them, they can no longer flee from their sins. She would probably end up turning herself in, after which the inquisitive eyes of both the media and the world would see her as a murderer and violate her by digging up her past and family circumstances. I didn't know if she'd be able to recover from that or not.

Shiho Sudou's end was here.

"My condolences."

I put my hands together perfunctorily.

"Now then, what's become of you?"

I turned to face Akiyama. Just as I expected, his face had gone pale and he was trembling in fear.

He must have known instinctive what would happen if his insides got exposed.

"...Your actions cannot help but confirm it. The one who induced Yahara to try to kill me was you — Kouta Hiiragi."

I heaved a sigh in exasperation at his inane comment.

"Are you still going on about that? In the first place, aren't *you* the one who killed *Masato*?"

"The fact that he tried to kill me is beyond a doubt the truth."

So in other words, the reason he ended up killing Masato was because Masato tried to kill him first and he fought back?

...That makes sense. The last piece of the puzzle slid into place.

"Okay, I get it now. What's manipulating you — no, what's manipulating all of us, what's controlling us, isn't me. I don't have that kind of power."

"What...?"

"The thing that led us all to this point is Masato."

Akiyama's eyes widened.

“In a way, we’re victims of the bomb he set off. I got dyed in him, and you got destroyed by him.”

“...You say I was destroyed?”

“Wouldja just fucking notice it already? You’re pretty far off-sync with your ideal self. Off-sync with your sensible, exemplary self. Think about it. You’ve been going around killing people you see as evil. Is that really in line with your ideals? Is a barbaric ideology like that really your idea of justice?”

His eyes still wide, Akiyama didn’t say a word.

All he had to do was self-reflect for an instant and he’d know the answer.

There was no way that’s what his ideals looked like.

“That what was it that made you like this? Did you really think that killing me and Yamazaki was the right thing to do? Whose idea was that?”

That’s right, Shuuichi, remember.

I don’t even need to invoke his name. Those feelings that you’re fleeing from were your true feelings all along.

Now then — tremble in fear.

“Matsumi-senpai. Scan Shuuichi Akiyama for me, would you?”

And fall into despair.

“You got it!”

Ririko Matsumi was an insane, deadly weapon. It was the Devil’s own magic, and it could thoroughly drive Akiyama into a corner.

“Beep bibi, beep bibibi...”

“...Stop it...”

“Beep bibibi, beep bibibi...”

“STOP ITTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT!”

In a fit of madness, Akiyama lunged at Matsumi-senpai.

“Kyah!”

Returning to her senses, Matsumi-senpai gave out a shriek. Akiyama was leaning over her collapsed figure with his fists raised. Her unseemly shriek was only natural.

I drew near Akiyama. Taking no heed of me, Akiyama was about to continue hitting Matsumi-senpai — continue hitting the truth that was about to be revealed, but he stopped when he noticed what I was pressing against him.

“Kouta, Hiiragi... You’re...”

I was pressing a fruit knife against the nape of his neck.

“...You understand, right? I’m dead serious. If you keep getting violent like this, you’re going to find your neck short a few arteries.”

Although a moment ago she had been being punched and looked as though she was about to cry, the fear vanished from Matsumi-senpai’s face in an instant and was replaced with surprised glee.

“Huh? What’s going on, what’s going on?”

Her cheeks lit up in excitement.

“Tanihara’s supposed to be dead, so why are you him?”

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

The blade still flush with his nape, Akiyama peered into my eyes.

“You’re not Kouta Hiiragi... Masato Yahara...? No, that’s ridiculous... But now that I think back, everything you’ve done and said has been just like him. You’re even putting a knife to me the same way he did.”

“Well, that’s ‘cause I am Masato Yahara.”

“...Are you saying that you’re acting as his proxy?”

“Oh, it’s nothing so half-assed as that. All I have to do is ask, and Kou’ll give over his body in a heartbeat. I am Masato Yahara himself.”

“Why would you do something like that!?”

“For revenge, of course.”

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

[illegible][illegible]

God, it's obnoxious.

This guy's chains really are louder than anyone else's.

The knife was in my hand. Akiyama could no longer resist. There was no reason to hesitate. One push, and my revenge would be complete. There wasn't a single reason to waver. There wasn't a single thing that could stop me. All I had to do was slash a shattered man with a knife. It was as simple as that.

I put my strength into the hand holding the knife.

I just needed to give in to my desire to kill.

And I could finally escape from this “nil,” this feeling that I was in a mass-produced shopping mall!

“Nooooooooo!”

I could hear footsteps running towards me, along with a voice I recognized.

But compared to the voice—

[illegible]

The sound of chains was far louder.

Shuuichi Akiyama's Closed World (II)

It was over in an instant.

Let me begin with an excuse. I tried to save him. My classmate was before my eyes, descending into depravity, and I tried to enlighten him and set him back on the right path.

But Masato Yahara tried to kill me. I didn't understand why. I extended the helping hand that he so desperately sought, but not only did he brush it away, he tried to consume to sate his hunger. I had no idea that such a person could even exist.

It was over in an instant. I was versed in self-defence, so in an instant I reversed the hand he was holding his knife in. Although I didn't mean for it to, the blade struck his heart fatally.

The scent of rusted iron, which already pervaded that abandoned factory, grew even stronger. With a look of anguish on his face, Masato Yahara collapsed.

It was the worst outcome imaginable.

—Why did this happen?

—Such a thing shouldn't happen, should it?

—What will become of me now?

I blocked off my sight.

I rejected the world.

I refused to accept reality.

White.

White.

White.

People only hear what they want to hear. And every solution they come up with is opportunistic.

I simply decided to surrender myself to a world of opportunistic.

I would simply forget all the inconvenient truths.

3, 2, 1 — And lo, they're gone.

Now then, why did I stab Masato Yahara to death?

It wouldn't do for it to have simply been a coincidence. It had to have been necessary, it had to have been just. I never made a mistake. I wasn't in the wrong — which meant that Masato Yahara must have been. Masato Yahara's death was necessary; killing him had been just.

It had to be that way.

That's right... I had called Masato Yahara a monster, hadn't I? That's right, that's right! Just as he had tried to kill me, he was a monster who could only affirm himself through killing others. If I hadn't killed him, innocent lives would have been lost!

Was there any problem with me killing a man like that? Of course not. It was an unavoidable measure, like shooting a bear before it can eat people. Somebody had to do it.

The events before my eyes were moving in slow motion. In this closed world, the concept of time was ambiguous, and all that thought could be accomplished in a moment.

Now then, time for the reception.

What I accepted into my field of view was a world that was amiable to me.

I looked down upon Masato Yahara.

"Now you can get out of here, hm... On that point alone, we are of the same opinion."

He gazed at me with eyes full of hate.

“Your life has no value... or rather, you’re like a vermin that deserves to die.”

Indeed. That was my reason for killing Masato Yahara.

That would do fine.

But I probably realized it even then.

Such a world could be popped more easily than a soap bubble.

Kouta Hiiragi's Closed World (V)

The familiar voice was drowned out. There was nothing that could stop me. Because everything had gone according to my plan, the result was as clear as the answer to one plus one.

I slashed at Shuuichi Akiyama's carotid artery.

Blood gushed out, the crimson fountain pleasantly engulfing me and staining my head red. It dyed both the rooftop and my stunted world red, and brought me to somewhere new entirely. That was how the matter had been decided.

Then I noticed.

I couldn't hear the sound of chains any more.

Why was that, "I" wondered?

After all, "I" hadn't been able to slit Akiyama's throat.

Akiyama's eyes were out of focus. He had already lost all reason. He was in no position to have stopped me, so it couldn't have been him.

But even so, my wrist hurt.

Someone was squeezing tightly on the wrist of the hand I was holding the knife in. Because of that, I hadn't been able to cut him.

Who would do such a thing?

I glared at the squeezing hand to try to figure out whose it was.

And the culprit, the one who held back my right hand was— "...Why?"

—*My left hand.*

I couldn't make sense of this. Why had I stopped myself? It made no sense.

Why was my body acting against my will? Was it being manipulated by remote control? Could you even do that? Was it even possible?

If it was possible, it would only be through— —*magic*.

“Kouta.”

I reflexively turned towards the voice.

There, illuminated by the golden twilight, stood Miki Kouzuki. Her long hair fluttered in the wind, each strand glittering like a jewel. Tears rolled down her smiling face. She was so beautiful it made my chest hurt, and it was almost unfair how freely she set the world in motion.

“Kouta, who are you?”

“I’m... Kouta Hiiragi...”

“That right. You’re Kouta Hiiragi, aren’t you?”

As she gradually approached me from the rooftop door, I was so stunned I couldn’t move. I stood there, paralyzed, and she took the knife from my hand. I felt as though I wouldn’t even be able to breathe without her permission.

“You aren’t Masato Yahara. You’re Kouta Hiiragi.”

Miki then leaned on me and moved my hand to her back.

“Kouta Hiiragi. You know what that is? The name of the person I like.”

And then.

Miki Kouzuki kissed me.

Ahh... I could feel my cramped world expand rapidly, as if I had just exited a long tunnel. Light flooded in through countless newly-opened doors and dazzled me.

But it was scary. Advancing through those doors was scary. I didn’t want to leave my cramped world. I didn’t want to learn about the expanded world. But this illuminated place no longer held anywhere to hide. I had no choice but to accept it.

As if affirming my existence, my shadow stood out against the light.

I had no choice but to be Kouta Hiiragi.

I had to accept that reality.

The bill I had been shirking so long had finally come due. I would have to stand up against all my powerful foes.

As Miki released my lips from hers, I finally remembered what was attached to the left hand that had just stopped the violence.

“Ahh... So that’s it.”

The red hair band.

The item Miki had stored her magic in.

What had stopped me — what had stopped the Masato Yahara inside me — had been Miki’s magic.

“That’s not it.”

But Miki firmly refuted that claim.

“Say, do you know why I kissed you just now?”

“To return me to normal...?”

“The next time you say something like that, I’m really going to hit you.”

“What!?”

“A woman’s lips aren’t so trivial a thing as that. No matter what her reason may be, even if she herself doesn’t realize it, there’s only one reason a woman ever kisses a man.”

Probably for the first time, Miki showed me a smile from the bottom of her heart.

“It’s because she likes him.”

In response to her confession, my mind went so white I thought my brains had been blown out. It was completely blank. Matsumi-senpai, socially inept as always, excitedly clamoured to the collapsed, corpse-like figures of Shiho Sudou

and Shuuichi Akiyama, “Hee hee, it’s a confession!”

Still unable to think, all that dwelled within me were emotions.

—I’m happy.

—I’ve been waiting for this.

—I’ve been waiting so long for Miki to put her feelings to words. So long!

“Uwa, uwaa...”

Before I realized it, I was crying too.

Not because I was happy.

Because I was sad.

Ahh, finally. I could finally understand my own feelings, I could finally put them to words.

—I was sad that Masato was dead.

“There’s something I just learned, see. In this world, you can make things complicated, or you can make them simple. It’s all up to you. And if that’s the case, then don’t you think making things simpler is nice?”

Miki gently stroked my hair.

“So you see, the reason you weren’t able to drive the knife any further—”

She brought her face to mine, and our tears converged.

“Was because you didn’t want to kill anybody... That’s all.”

And that was a truth that I had no reason to doubt.

Kouta Hiiragi's Open World (I)

It was a shopping mall that filled one with déjà vu the first time one visited it, yet existed nowhere. It was nothing more than a counterfeit.

“Kou.”

There was only one person who called me by that nickname.

“Masato.”

Masato Yahara. His hair was dyed blonde, his looks were handsome enough that it wouldn't be strange for him to be a member of an idol group, and he was my only friend in the world.

But his body was fading away, already half-gone.

“...Sorry.”

“What're you apologizing for?”

“I couldn't take revenge in your place. I couldn't save you.”

Masato heaved a sigh with an amazed look on his face.

“I see you're just as stupid as ever, Kou. When the hell did I ask you to do something like that? For that matter, does it even look like that's what I want?”

“...Well, I guess you don't.”

Masato had never forced or pressed me into doing anything. He never wanted to get deeply involved with anyone.

“I'm already dead. I can't even talk any more. Even the 'me' that's here now is just something you thought up. All that's goin' on right now is a one-man ventriloquist show.”

“A one-man show, huh... If that's true, at least the script's well-written.”

It was difficult to imagine that his sarcastic quips had all come from my own head. The Masato inside my head was clearly able to do and think things that

my real self never would.

“In your dreams, you sometimes see shit that you’d never be able to think up when you’re awake, right? People just have that kind of latent power. And Kou, you might just be an expert when it comes to that stuff. Most people can’t even begin to understand other people’s world. They try their best, and all they’re able to do is misinterpret them as something completely different. But you had the capacity to reproduce me like this. And when you’re playing my part, you’re practically a changed man, free from all of your normal stupidity.”

“You’re just as harsh as always, I see...”

Masato laughed cynically in response. He gave off a very Masato-like smile, one full of resignation.

“You’ve already mourned for me plenty.”

Mourn.

I hadn’t even realized that that was what I was doing at the time.

But... Ahh... It fit perfectly. I simply wanted, in my own way, to mourn the loss of my one and only friend. I didn’t want to forget about him, and I didn’t want to let everyone else forget about him either.

“Kou, what do you see when you look up at the moon?”

Masato asked me the same question he had that night in the park.

“Do you still just see the craters as craters?”

I thought for a moment. Craters were craters. That hadn’t changed.

“Well... it’s a little different than before.”

His interest piqued, Masato raised an eyebrow.

“If someone tells me they see a rabbit pounding mochi, I can too. If someone tells me they see a monster baring its fangs, I can too. Before, I couldn’t see anything, but now I feel like I *can* see anything. I feel like I can turn it into anything. Well, maybe... Maybe that’s not any different than before, but—”

“That’s completely different, ain’t it?”

But Masato didn’t seem to feel like elaborating.

“But I guess this is goodbye, then.”

As he said that, Masato began fading away even more. His very existence was fading.

As I continued on in life, I would never forget about Masato. But I could no longer become him. As he waned little by little, as he separated from the center of my heart, he settled like dust beneath the bulk of my memories.

I would never be able to retrieve him that way again.

“—Masato!”

I called out to him, stopping him as he was about to fade along with the counterfeit shopping mall.

“Oh, what is it?”

“Masato... Masato, are you—”

I had to ask him, just this once.

“Are you glad that you were born?”

At the sight of my no-doubt frantic expression, Masato gave an exasperated but no doubt secretly pleased smile.

“No listen here, you... If you wanted to ask that, you shoulda done it when I was alive. I just fuckin’ explained how everything that comes out of my mouth is just part of the script you wrote. ...Are you fine asking me that, even so?”

I nodded.

But I already knew his answer. Masato’s ultramarine closed world festered, rejecting the light. If a meddlesome heart had sprung up within me like it had in a certain someone, I probably would have tried to shine a light within that ultramarine.

But Masato was dead. He was no longer capable of changing.

—Rattle, rattle. Rattle, rattle.

Having lost all his color, the monochrome Masato replied with a bashful laugh.

“Not even a tiny fuckin’ bit.”

—Goodbye, Masato.

—Ah, what a surprise it is to see you outside of school, Hiiragi. As you can see, Ririko is a literary girl who loves books. Hm? I’m reading the books from really far away, you say? Ayup. You see, Ririko can use scanning on books. Ririko can learn all the contents in an instant. That’s amazing, you say? Right? Come on, praise me, praise me! Hm? There’s something you wanted to ask me, you say? Why, go ahead. ...The reason Ririko called out to you two back then, huh? Ririko told you the first time we met, Ririko wanted to get to become good friends with Hiiragi. Why, you ask? Well that’s because Hiiragi is white, you see. ...Oh, and also, Ririko had a dream the day before that. In the dream, when Ririko called out to you two and scanned you, Hiiragi and Tanihara’s friendship broke down. Then, Tanihara became emotionally unstable and killed Akiyama, see. Tanihara turned himself, and Kouzuki broke up with Hiiragi because all he could think about was Tanihara, so Hiiragi was all alone. He gradually became pure white. He was like a fresh snow in the middle of the forest, and it was really pretty. Then, the pure white Hiiragi and Ririko became really good friends. Hiiragi understood Ririko even better than before, and they went beep bibibi and stuff together. Ririko already knew from the scanning, but you’re a virgin, right? Did you know that sex feels really good? You see, Ririko knows just how to make men feel good, so in the dream Hiiragi became Ririko’s captive. He was all over her, you know, and he would do whatever Ririko said. ...Kusukusu... By the way, you know how adult men always act really really self-important around girls like Ririko? But when you take off their veneers, they’re actually as funny as clowns. You know the red lumps running through their brains, well, if you fiddle with them right, you can make them dance ecstatically in pleasure. Isn’t that funny? There are even some people who can’t come back from the pleasure. ...Huh? You want to know if Ririko’s dream was prophetic? Yeah, most of them are. It’s actually really weird how the dream wasn’t right this time. I wonder why that was? Was it Kouzuki’s fault, maybe? She meddles with Hiiragi too much. ...Huh? Aren’t Ririko’s prophetic dreams just the result of her drawing unconscious conclusions from her powers of memory and analytic

ability, you say? ...Ririko doesn't understand complicated stuff like that, even if you explain it. Ririko just wanted to become good friends with Hiiragi. That was all; nothing else was really important. Hm? Ririko's a mean person, you say? Why? And anyways, everyone else are the mean ones, right? Everyone treats Ririko so rudely. And even Hiiragi used Ririko as a tool, right? Ririko has at least enough self-awareness to know that. So really, Ririko is the one who should be pitied, no? ...Ah, Hiiragi doesn't have to show Ririko any sympathy, and we don't need to become good friends any more. You see, Ririko isn't interested in Hiiragi any more. He kind of became too normal. But, but, Ririko will come help you whenever you need her to, Hiiragi. Ririko can even teach you about pleasure. Isn't Ririko nice? She's nice, isn't she? Ehehe, thanks.

—Bye bye, then.

After being arrested for the crimes of killing his classmate Masato Yahara and abandoning the body, Shuuichi Akiyama stopped attending school through the beginning of summer break.

Shiho Sudou was prosecuted for the involuntary manslaughter of Ryuusuke Yamazaki. The defense argued that it was legitimate self-defense. I had already met with her lawyer and promised to testify on her behalf if it became necessary.

It would have been completely natural for her to hold a grudge against me after I sent Ririko Matsumi after her to scan her and break her spirit. But when I went to visit her at the detention center, she actually thanked me for my cooperation. Even fact, she even seemed happy. The reason for her improved outlook was that apparently this incident had inspired her family to get their act together for her sake. Adversity builds character... but there was quite a bit of adversity, so it remains to be seen what character will be built out of it. But if nothing else, after the way I had used her, I wanted to do whatever I could to help her.

On the other hand, and you couldn't really blame him, Akiyama refused to meet me. Apparently he had quite the breakdown, and could barely even speak. Occasionally the detention center would be filled with his terrified

moans. No doubt he was still being tormented by visions of Masato.

Did I still resent him for killing Masato?

Although I gave that question a bit of thought, I wasn't totally sure. Although killing him was a bit much, I couldn't deny that Akiyama had been acting in legitimate self-defense. If not for Masato, Akiyama probably could have lived out the rest of his life as nothing more than an obstinate honors student. In a way, he too was a victim. But even though I knew that logically, the unpleasant feeling in my heart refused to fade. Whether that feeling was hatred, rage, or something else entirely, not even I knew.

Many such unidentifiable emotions whirled throughout my brain, existing as noise due to my inability to govern them. Before, I would have just abandoned all my thoughts and emotions and returned to being perfectly even.

But I wasn't able to do that anymore.

In my new, unstable state, Miki came to visit me almost every day and drag me out of my house. Arcades, karaoke boxes, bowling alleys, tennis courts, movie theaters, ramen shops, restaurants, cafés — I had spent years only going back and forth between home and school, so all of those ordinary, common places were new and fresh to me. Amused by my innocent reactions, Miki eventually got carried away and took me somewhere unbelievable.

Okinawa.

I stood completely still atop a pearly-white beach. I was speechless at how absurdly clear the emerald ocean was.

When I looked at the blue sky melt into the ocean, I felt as though my day-to-day life was fusing with something powerful and mysterious. I felt as if I was no longer just myself. Like the odd pleasure you get from peeling off a scab, being here felt like it had freed me from the constraints of my emotions.

My eyes were no doubt wide as I stared at the ocean, and Miki slapped my shoulder playfully. Her terrycloth hoodie, combined with the the healthy pair of legs extending from her swimsuit bottom, gave off the impression of a model on her way to a photo shoot. Perhaps because it wasn't particularly well-known, or perhaps because summer vacation hadn't started yet, the beach was only

sparsely populated. But even so, I could tell Miki was turning the heads of both men and women alike. Apparently being at the center of attention like this was normal for her, as she seemed wholly unconcerned.

In Miki's world, no doubt being liked and desired by others was normal. It was completely different from my world, in which most people ignored me.

Miki took her hair, which was a bit longer than it had been when we'd met, and bundled it up with the scrunchie she'd been holding.

It was the first time I'd see Miki in a ponytail in a while.

"You know, I think it looks better that way."

Miki's cheeks reddened.

"...My father is right over there, and you're hitting on me?"

"That wasn't my intention..."

"My heart skipped a beat, you know."

Miki stroked her tied-up hair meaningfully.

"By the way, when were you going to take this off for me?"

I held up my left arm.

The red hair band, which even now I couldn't remove of my own volition, still rested there.

"Oh, you should just wear it the rest of your life."

"I feel like it'll get all moldy and scratchy at times like this if I do... Miki, didn't you say you were going to stop believing in magic?"

Miki had more or less stopped talking about magic all the time. But recently, I had been suspecting that she might be a genuine magus after all.

In the end, she had altered the destinies of a number of people. And she was liable to keep doing so going forward.

And on top of that — that kiss.

Miki had said that wasn't magic, but I was pretty sure she was lying.

After all, I hadn't been able to stay away from her since then. When we were

apart, my chest hurt, proving that I was still under her control even when we weren't together.

What could that be, other than magic?

But that was probably all nonsense. If she herself said it wasn't magic, and she truly believed that, then I guess it wasn't magic. My becoming like this was too just a pleasant notion I had constructed.

But even so, there was still something that plagued my mind.

Even if we were together nearly every day, Miki was still another person. Everything about our value systems was different. No matter how well I got to know Miki, there would still be countless things I didn't know about her. Even today, when I saw the clear emerald ocean, when I learned of a whole new world, even though my own world expanded and light flooded in, it still didn't intersect Miki's world. Just because the range that I could travel expanded didn't mean I could ever reach there.

Our worlds, without exception, weren't open to anyone.

That was the same no matter whether I was dealing with Miki or with Masato.

The sound of chains. Although I could hear that sound when I was playing the part of Masato, I still couldn't say that I knew what it meant. Masato went on about chains a number of times, and when Matsumi-senpai scanned him she said that he was afflicted with auditory hallucinations. That was probably where I first conceived of it.

But I no longer had any way of knowing if the real Masato heard the sound of chains or not.

And, even if he had heard the sound of chains, it wouldn't matter. The sound of chains wasn't real. All that had been there was the Masato I came up with.

Whenever we interact with someone we come up with a version of them formed from our own ego, and all we can interact with is that version of them.

"Kouta, you're getting all quiet and serious on me. Penny for your thought? ...Ah, I know. You wanna see what's underneath this hoodie! Well, fine, I suppose if you want to see it that badly then it can't be helped!"

After saying something presumptuous, Miki vigorously stripped. Her slender waist, which looked like it would snap if you hugged her too hard, and her cute, oblong navel came into full view. Her bikini top concealed a pair of soft-looking bulges. And even though her ribs stood out, she had some good skin on her bones.

A playful grin danced across her lips.

“Aha, did arouse you a bit? Did it?”

I’ll be blunt.

Damn. I wouldn’t have taken Miki for the type to look skinnier dressed...

Surprised at my own vulgar thoughts, I lost my presence of mind and couldn’t answer her. Or rather... This was the first time in my life I’d ever been aroused by a flesh-and-blood girl. Ahh... Ooh... Miki, you’re amazing.

Before I noticed, Miki had responded to my unexpected wonderment by retracting her playful grin, replacing it with a bashful expression and readorning her hoodie.

“...Excuse me, just because my father’s over there doesn’t mean you can get all pervy on me. ...Don’t look at me! I said don’t look!”

She was red to the tips of her ears.

Even though she’s the one who showed me...

“And whose fault is that?”

“...Well, uh, it’s because I was enticing you... Wait, wait, wait, that’s not it! Don’t go blaming this on others! It’s because you’re a perv! You coaxed me into it!”

“Miki, you really don’t understand how attractive you are, do you...”

“And now you’re hitting on me again! And it’s working! I can’t stand this! Daaaad! Dad, heeelp! There’s a beast disguised as a saint over here!”

After that exchange, we went back to our normal high spirits and headed for the water’s edge. We both stuck our feet in the ocean, taking in the sensation of lukewarm waves tickling at our feet.

“You know, this is my first time seeing the ocean.”

“Oh, really?”

“It’s also my first time leaving the Kantou region, actually.”

“...You really did live in a closed world, didn’t you, Kouta.”

That was the way it had to be. I couldn’t possess my own will or hopes.

At least, not before I met Miki.

I gazed at the horizon. The clear sea sparkled under the sun’s aggressive glare, connecting the world together. Somewhere it would become ice, somewhere it was filled with garbage, somewhere it was steeped in blood. The same waves that lapped gently at my feet could at times swallow people to their doom.

Why was it, I wondered?

I was crying. The tears wouldn’t stop.

But even seeing me like that, Miki didn’t draw back. She just squeezed my left wrist, the same wrist that was bound by the red hair band.

She then gave me a wide smile, with the corners of her mouth fully upturned. A smile clearer than the ocean, so attractive it was almost devilish.

“It would be nice if this day could last forever.”

To be honest, I disagreed. From here on out we would continue to grow, and our feelings would change. I wanted Miki to be free. I wanted her to shine. I didn’t want her to be chained down by the emotions of this moment. I didn’t want her to be chained down like me.

But right now, I knew what Miki wanted me to say. Or rather, I knew what her smile was practically forcing me to say.

Ahh, I see—

We don’t open anywhere.

But this level of mutual understanding was possible.

It was something pleasant, no doubt, something that if understood might lead to true happiness.

“You’re right, it would be nice if this day could last forever.”

And the moment the words left my mouth, only for a moment, I wished for eternity from the bottom of my heart.

Fin.

Afterword

There was a time when I didn't want anyone to read "We Don't Open Anywhere."

Before my stunned eyes, the work that I had stubbornly written for submission had been announced for publication, and despite my feeling decidedly unlike a pro was circulated throughout the country and exposed to the public. I was so much an amateur and unfamiliar with the industry that I'd never heard the phrase "light novel," and the idea of being criticised had unbelievably never crossed my mind. When it went on sale, of course, there were many opinions on it, and they overwhelmed me and filled me with despair. Although many kind readers gave me positive comments, I felt as though I was being mocked from every direction. I wanted to wipe away the memories of everyone who had read it. I truly resented the fact that this world of ours lacks the kind of reset buttons you would find in video games.

To be able to remake and re-release such a work just proves that the world is full of surprises. In fact, I now wanted the work that I once didn't want read by anyone to be read by as many people as possible. It's so embarrassing that I couldn't bear to say it aloud, but the basis for Kouta Hiiragi was my nimbly drifting, self-lacking high school self. And the basis for Masato Yahara was my truly murderous middle school self. The original novel's jacket branded it as controversial on the jacket, and the publisher refused to put illustrations in it. But even though people called it "imprudent" and "dark" and "unsettling," I truly wrote it praying that it would instill hope in the readers. ...No, seriously.

The market has recently been flooded with these resplendent, dazzling tales of adolescence, but most people didn't have such youths. I myself found my school years rather painful. I was decent with people, and I had quite a few friends, but even so the bad memories far outweigh the good ones. I never want to go back to such an unpleasant time. When I wrote "We Don't Open Anywhere," I wrote it with the fervent desire to save my oppressed adolescent

self. To the me of that era, all the stories filled with themes of love and romance and camaraderie and justice and adolescence felt like they were full of bullshit. It felt like I was looking at someone else's feces and vomit. I wanted a story written for me, an earnest story that wasn't filled with platitudes.

And even if the world's changed a bit since then, I'm sure there are still many people like that. And I thought people like that might find this novel worthwhile. So I can't help but hope that this story touches somebody.

I also feel that deconstructing "We Don't Open Anywhere" and rewriting it was crucial for me going forward as an author. If you'll allow me to brag a little, my technical skills have definitely improved since my days as a rookie, but at the same time my honest, unfiltered zeal has faded bit by bit. I feel like this rewrite has helped me regain my old power, even if just a little bit.

At the same time, there are people that found this novel important to them, and their voices reach me even today. It's thanks to them that I was able to rewrite and re-release "We Don't Open Anywhere" like this, and it's thanks to them that I have the self-confidence to continue living as an author. All I can do is thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

I pray that this rewritten version of "We Don't Open Anywhere" will become important to someone.

Fall 2016

Eiji Mikage

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_school_uniform#Gakuran
2. ↑ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supermoon>
3. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moon_rabbit
4. ↑ Masato's last name, 谷原, can be read as either 'Yahara' or 'Tanihara'
5. ↑ The original joke here went about as follows:
 - Masato: "What kind of pan (bread) can you not eat?"
 - OL: "A frying pan?"
 - Masato: "Why'd the answer have to be frying pan? Why couldn't it have been A-kyuusenpan (class-A war criminal)?"
6. ↑ ~\$180
7. ↑ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gyaru>
8. ↑ This...

doesn't translate super neatly. Essentially, Japanese has a number of variants on the word "I", with Kouta generally using a more polite, reserved masculine I ("boku") and Masato using a less polite, aggressive masculine I ("ore"). Throughout the story, all instances of "ore" are going to be and have been bolded, as those both plot-relevant and sort-of bolded in the original text.
9. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbarous_name
10. ↑ "Boku". See Miki Kouzuki's Closed World (I) for more details.
11. ↑ Castle in the Sky. This particular quote was simply replaced by laughter in the dub.
12. ↑ Akiyama is referencing Kinpachi Sensei, a Japanese drama from the late 70s. The line in question is effectively "one bad orange spoils the

bunch," but Akiyama seems to have missed the message of the two episodes in question (Season 2, Episodes 5 and 6) which was that people and fruit shouldn't be judged along the same metrics. I had to track down and watch those episodes so I could get the reference. You're all welcome.

13. ↑ ~\$9000
14. ↑ Kouta is asking about what version of "I" they used, specifically whether or not it was "watashi," which is an oddly formal pronoun for a guy their age and the one that Shuuichi uses.
15. ↑ "Boku"
16. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kei_car
17. ↑ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aokigahara>

We Don't Open Anywhere

-There are no facts, only interpretations.

Bokura wa Dokonimo Hirakanai -There are no facts, only interpretations.-

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